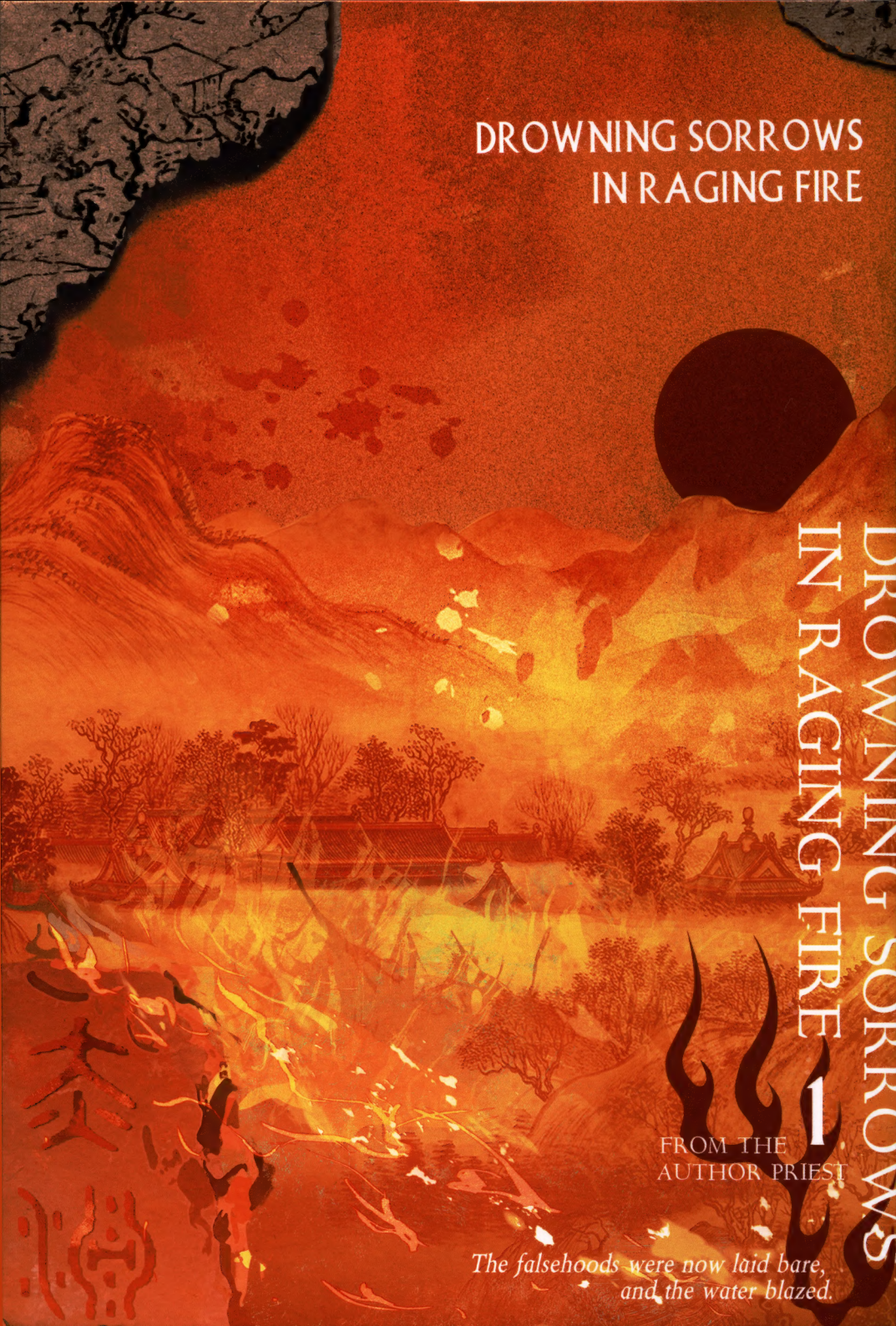
DROWNING SORROWS
IN RAGING FIRE
DROWNING SORROWS
IN RAGING FIRE 1
FROM THE
AUTHOR PRIEST
The falsehoods were now laid bare,
and the water blazed.

DROWNING SORROWS
IN RAGING FIRE
1
FROM THE AUTHOR PRIEST

Drowning Sorrows in Raging Fire Vol. 1 by Priest

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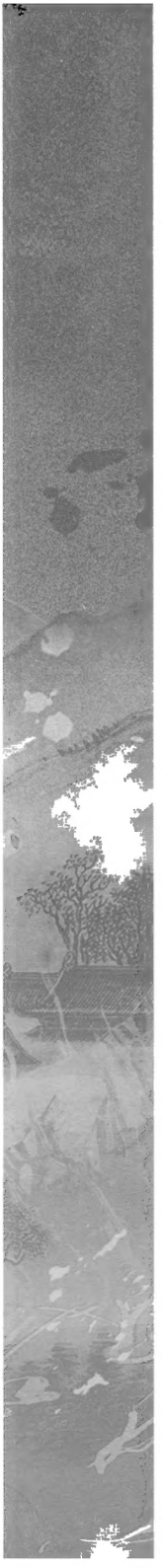

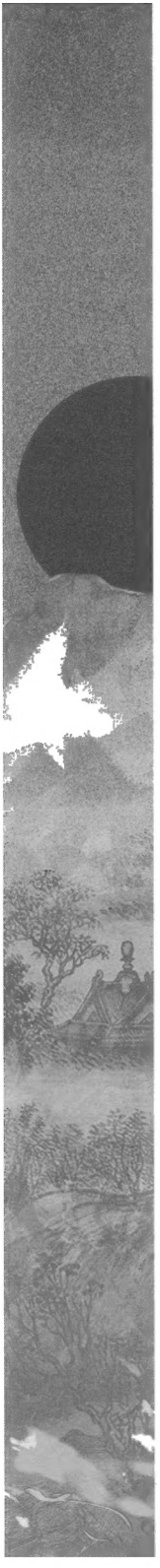

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Glossary

Sheng Lingyuan | 盛灵渊

His surname, Sheng, has several possible meanings: "flourishing", "vigorous", "magnificent", or "extensive". The *ling* in his given name, Lingyuan, carries multiple meanings, such as "intelligent", "agile", "spirits", "deities", "effective", or "associated with the afterlife", while *yuan* literally means "abyss". The *wu* (武) in his regal name, Emperor Wu, means "martial", reflecting his military history.

Xuan Ji | 宣玑

His surname, Xuan, has several possible meanings: "to announce", "to spread", "to express", "to guide", or "to summon". His given name, Ji, can refer to "an imperfect pearl" or "an ancient astronomical instrument". The name "Xuan Ji" sounds similar to the star, "Xuanji (璇玑)".

***Gege* | 哥哥**

Gege, or sometimes simply *ge*, is an endearing term that

means "older brother". It can be used as a suffix or on its own to address a blood relative or brother figure. *Ge* is also commonly used between friends.

yao | 妖

A race distinct from humans. They possess a wide variety of true forms depending on their clan, ranging from plant-like to animal-like creatures. Many are also capable of taking on human form. The yao are intelligent and reproductively compatible with humans.

***yin, yang* | 阴, 阳**

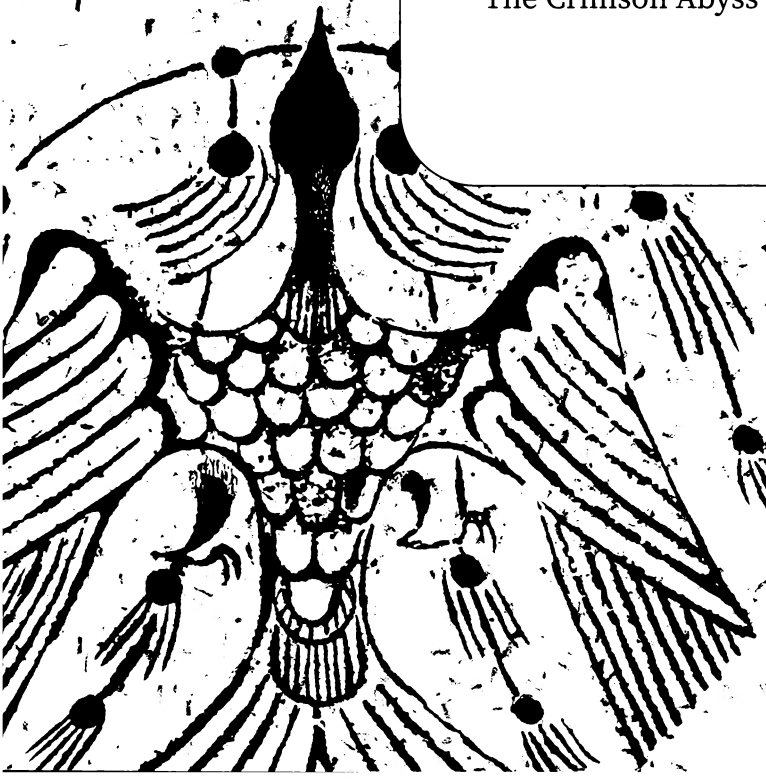
The word *yang* signifies the life force of living beings, embodying positivity and vitality. In contrast, *yin* is associated with qualities like darkness, cold, discomfort, oppression, and a lack of energy.

***zhen* | 朕**

In ancient China, "*zhen*" was a first-person pronoun equivalent to "I" or "my". During the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), Emperor Qin Shi Huang designated "*zhen*" to be the self-reference pronoun used exclusively by emperors. This tradition persisted until the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912). It was typically used in formal settings or written language.

Prologue

The Crimson Abyss



Prologue

Late Autumn. Year 21 of the Qizheng era. The Great Qi Empire.

A cavalry galloped down the road, both men and horses worn from travel. Suddenly, the young man at the head of the group shouted, "We've arrived at the boundary stele!"

Not far ahead stood a stone monument greater than a man in height, etched with vivid crimson calligraphy. The imposing sign read: *Here lies the Crimson Abyss, beyond which the living shall not pass, lest ye perish.* Beside it, a middle-aged general and a line of soldiers stood waiting. Armour clanging, the guards knelt in unison.

"Greetings to Your Royal Highness, the Crown Prince."

The young soldier leading the cavalry leapt down from his steed before it could come to a halt, causing him to stumble. The welcoming general rushed to help him. "Are you all right, Your Highness?"

"I'm fine." The young man waved his hand and asked, "Where is my un... Imperial Father?"

He'd barely finished speaking when he heard his pet name called from a short distance away. "Tong'er, this way."

The young heir turned to find a lone black-clad man, his back to the soldiers, standing past the boundary stele that promised death to all trespassers. The prince glanced at the crimson letters carved into the stele and, without hesitation, crossed into where even gods feared to tread. He knelt before the man.

"Your Maj—"

The man extended a hand to dismiss the gesture. "Rise."

His words and actions were steady and unhurried, demonstrating great poise. Though he appeared aged from behind, his face was surprisingly untouched by time, presenting an unsettling contrast. His eyebrows were as sharp and decisive as blades, yet the crescents of his eyes dipped downward at the corners, implying a touch of gentleness. Looking at his handsome face alone, it was hard to believe that this man was Sheng Xiao, Emperor Wu of Great Qi, sovereign for twenty-one years.

The prince rose and called out softly, "Uncle."

The emperor had no children of his own; his heir was the orphan he had adopted after his late brother's passing. Because Sheng Xiao was cold and distant by nature, the prince referred to him as "Imperial Father" in public for the sake of decorum. But privately, the two still called each other nephew and uncle.

"Would it scare you to walk on this side of the stele with me?" Sheng Xiao asked.

"Of course not, Uncle! As a young man, you restored the land to its former glory by bringing peace to the Abyss, suppressing the evil yao race, and slaying millions of ghost soldiers. I cannot

hope to compare myself to your existence, but I dare even less to speak of fear, lest it tarnish your reputation."

"Reputation? Do you mean my infamy?" Sheng Xiao chuckled nonchalantly and walked forth. "Do you hear it?"

The prince listened intently, but only the wind made itself known. "I don't hear a thing."

The emperor smiled. "Precisely. Nothing remains."

The prince took a moment to recall the legends he had heard as a child. It was said that millions of vengeful souls had been sealed in the fires of the Abyss, their resentment so strong that a fiery gale blew incessantly through the canyon. That standing before the boundary stele, one could hear agonising wails from the other side. Yet now that he walked safely within the boundary, with only stifling silence and scorching heat for company, he came to a single conclusion: *Folklore and legends are indeed filled with rumours and exaggerations.*

They had barely advanced two hundred steps past the boundary when they were met with a wave of scalding air. It was late autumn, and though the prince wore only a thinly lined robe, it had been soaked through. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead. Stealing a glance at his uncle, he ultimately resisted the urge to wipe them away.

Emperor Wu had a bad reputation. Stories of how he was a temperamental madman, born from a pool of his father's and brothers' blood, circulated among the folk performers of the land. They claimed that he'd killed his mother and teacher, burnt books, and limited public rhetoric. That he favoured sycophants, exploited his army to wage reckless wars, and even

slaughtered his loyal subjects. But to the young prince, this man was his only family. Rain or shine, his uncle was always gentle and calm, never speaking harshly or appearing unkempt. The prince had looked up to him his whole life. Even now, as an eighteen-year-old with the strength to draw the heaviest bow and the knowledge and poise to govern a state, he found himself looking to his uncle, chasing his back as he had always done.

When the two had advanced a mile past the boundary, Sheng Xiao stopped. The smell of sulphur began to fill their noses, and the prince found himself short of breath.

"Let us stop here this year. You will be burned if we go any further."

The prince was perplexed. "This year?"

"Yes. This year." Sheng Xiao turned around and drew his nephew's sword. A protective ward was engraved into the metal, and the symbols glowed red as the scalding winds of the Abyss swept along the blade's length. He stabbed the sword into the ground. "This is the first and most important task I have for you. I've spent my whole life tackling the Abyss, and I'm finally seeing results. By my estimate, this sword can advance five miles each year. In less than a decade, the Austral Flames will be extinguished completely. Once the sword reaches the edge, and the canyon is windless, you may station someone from the Bureau of Peace here."

The prince was stunned by these words. A sinking feeling filled his heart. "Unc... Imperial Father, wha..."

"My Prince," Sheng Xiao said impassively, "*Zhen* hereby pass unto thee the Throne of Great Qi."

The prince fell to his knees. Twice this year, Emperor Wu had left the capital to inspect the empire and suppress dissent across the realm, allowing the prince to oversee the state's affairs. The emperor had gradually relinquished control of internal governance, carefully paving the way for the incoming ruler. The young heir had been preparing himself for this day as these changes unfolded, but no amount of preparation could have allowed him to accept this reality so easily.

"I've taught you everything that needed to be taught," Sheng Xiao went on, barely sparing him a glance. "As for the rest... Zhang Bo and Kong Yu will both make fine subjects. Zhao Kuan is still imprisoned under false charges. Release him and offer compensation to his clan. He will devote his entire being to serving you. A son does not speak of his father's faults, so when you find it troubling to speak ill of me in the future, push Yang Dong out as a sycophant who will bring calamity to the country. That man is no paragon of virtue, and he's been eating his mind dull and his gut full for years. Consider him my gift to you."

The prince crumpled over, pressing his forehead to the ground. "Imperial Father, you are at the peak of your reign."

Sheng Xiao looked amused by his nephew's reaction. "What, do you expect me to work until I'm old and frail—or in a coffin? I've been toiling for the empire for decades. Have pity on me, won't you? Zhang Bo and Feng Chun both possess a copy of the edict. Feng was a close friend of your father's when he was alive, so don't worry. He will look after you."

The young man's eyes reddened.

Sheng Xiao looked towards the Abyss, his hands clasped be-

hind his back. "Do you remember how your birth parents met their end?"

"This dutiful son dares not forget for even a day."

"Good." Sheng Xiao nodded approvingly. "You've grown up. You know the path that you must walk. Now go; the Austral Flames will one day be extinguished, but the heat still remains. Staying any longer will harm you."

"Then, what about..."

"I shall stay for a few days more." Sheng Xiao waved his hand and did not elaborate. "A country cannot be without a ruler. There is much to do in the capital, so hasten back."

The prince knew that the emperor's words were final, and he dared not disobey. Reluctantly, he turned and left. When he reached the boundary stele, he couldn't help but look back at the man once more. His uncle was seated on the ground in front of the sword. The unspoken farewell weighed heavily like a stone in the prince's heart. He shook his head but found himself growing dizzy from the heat. Kneeling before the stele, he prostrated himself to the black-robed man before rushing back to the capital overnight, speeding down the road towards his destiny.

After sending the prince away, Sheng Xiao ordered the imperial guards to await orders at their posts, leaving behind a single personal bodyguard.

As night descended, the lone guard approached Sheng Xiao. After making sure they were alone, he knelt and hunched over. His armour fell away, and his clothes crumpled to the ground. A chick no bigger than a palm wriggled out from under the pile

and perched next to Sheng Xiao.

"Oh, that's right..." Sheng Xiao scratched its neck and pulled out a fine golden thread from between its feathers. "Almost forgot about you."

Complex inscriptions flowed over the golden thread, which appeared as if it were part of the bird's neck. Sheng Xiao lightly pinched the thread, and it shattered at his fingertips. Immediately, the chick grew to more than ten times its original size. It swiftly unfolded its wings and raised its head, letting out a cry that stirred the stars in the southern sky—it turned out to be a young firebird known as a bifang.

Sheng Xiao stood up. "You no longer have to watch over me or serve me. From now on, we are both free."

The bifang took a hesitant step forward and tugged timidly at his robe. When the man met the bird's gaze, it flinched and meekly let go.

Sheng Xiao removed his diadem and placed it askew on the bird's head. Then he discarded his seal, thumb ring, jade pendants, and other accessories. Finally, he unfastened his necklace—a jade pendant shaped like a man. He gave it one last glance before casually tossing it aside.

The pendant was clearly important. The bifang leapt after it in panic, carefully catching it in its beak. By the time it turned around, the man had begun walking towards the Abyss, his hair loose and dishevelled. The firebird chirped anxiously. Forgetting the pendant, it flapped its wings to give chase.

The Abyss spanned a thousand miles, and violently hot magma flowed within. When the bifang was two hundred steps

from the cliff, its wings suddenly erupted into black flames. It screeched and tumbled to the ground. Having nearly become roast poultry, it knew it could go no further.

Sheng Xiao, however, had reached the cliff's edge, his robes and boots scorched by the heat. It was here that his stoic mask finally cracked, revealing madness and elation.

It was better to be mortal. A mortal life lasted for but a moment. Bitterness or joy, both spanned a few fleeting decades. The pain a mortal shell experienced was always limited. Often, one would be released from torment before even feeling it. As for Sheng Xiao... Well, he might have to suffer a little.

The bird released a screeching cry as Sheng Xiao threw himself into the sea of flames. Searing heat consumed him. Everything it touched immediately burned black. His hair disintegrated, his flesh peeling off layer by layer. Blood vessels burst through charred muscle. His blood boiled, and every last meridian was severed. He coughed up a mouthful of ash that might have been his heart or his lungs. Then, his body crashed into the hard crust above the molten rock. His body proved far sturdier; despite having fallen from a lofty height, it didn't shatter against the surface. His spine snapped in half and pierced through the igneous shell, sending flames high into the sky like a war banner. Magma hot enough to melt gold and crack jade swallowed him whole.

Even then, he still wasn't dead.

If one could experience the sensation of having their bones pulverised to dust and scattered to the winds, then every memory and experience that had been so profoundly etched into

their existence would be rendered to nothing more than dust on stone. The narrative of Sheng Xiao's life, encompassing all of its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, became one with his melting consciousness in that great fire.

Incessant laughter echoed through the Crimson Abyss that day. It persisted until the stubborn remnants that would not be reduced to ash gradually sank, returning the disturbed magma to stillness.

> *Sheng Xiao, Emperor Wu of Great Qi.*
> Following the death of King Ping in the Crimson Abyss at the hands of the yao, his youngest son, Sheng Xiao, succeeded the throne. Rising from a tumultuous time, he slew the King of the Yao beneath the walls of Yong'an at the age of three-and-twenty and proclaimed it the start of the Qizheng era. He restored the empire and pacified the borders, a deed that rivalled those of the Five Great Emperors, but with cruelty and bloodlust, he corrupted both principle and virtue. He ruled for one-and-twenty years before taking his own life in the Austral Fires of the Abyss, leaving no remains. A decade after the ascension of Emperor Wen, the fires subsided, and peace came upon the Abyss. Emperor Wen withdrew the boundary stele and erected a mausoleum in the name of Emperor Wu.

The blue sea turned into mulberry fields; over a thousand

autumns, a vast forest grew on the ashes of the fire. The primaeval forest of the Crimson Canyon became a top-ranked tourist attraction of national interest.

Deep within the earth, a tremor emerged, followed by indistinct, unsettling mutterings. The noises grew louder and louder, enshrouded in an unfamiliar ritual. Like sharp needles, they pierced into "his" chaotic consciousness.

What... is that noise? Who dares to cause a commotion?

"I will sacrifice everything..."

"With my body... as a medium..."

"May the gods above and the demons below..."

"Demon..."

The sudden clamour left him bewildered.

Before he could gather his bearings, he was bombarded by stimuli. Senses that had been dormant for millennia abruptly awoke and greedily extended their tendrils outward, taking in every vibrant detail. The noisy world outside crashed into him, boring into his consciousness—the texture of the soil and its musky smell, the sound of the wind and rustling leaves, footsteps, voices...

"Who dares disturb my slumber?" The loss of control roused his fury. Ominous black clouds emerged from the depths of his mind, manifesting as sharp claws, and lashed out at the voice that had so audaciously disturbed him. "Insolent fool!"

But amid the chaos in his mind, his newly awakened senses

detected a presence—faint, but somehow familiar. The storm immediately subsided, and his heart, which had lain still for millennia, trembled.

What... was that?

His hostility dissipated, but before he could catch hold of that familiar presence, it was gone.

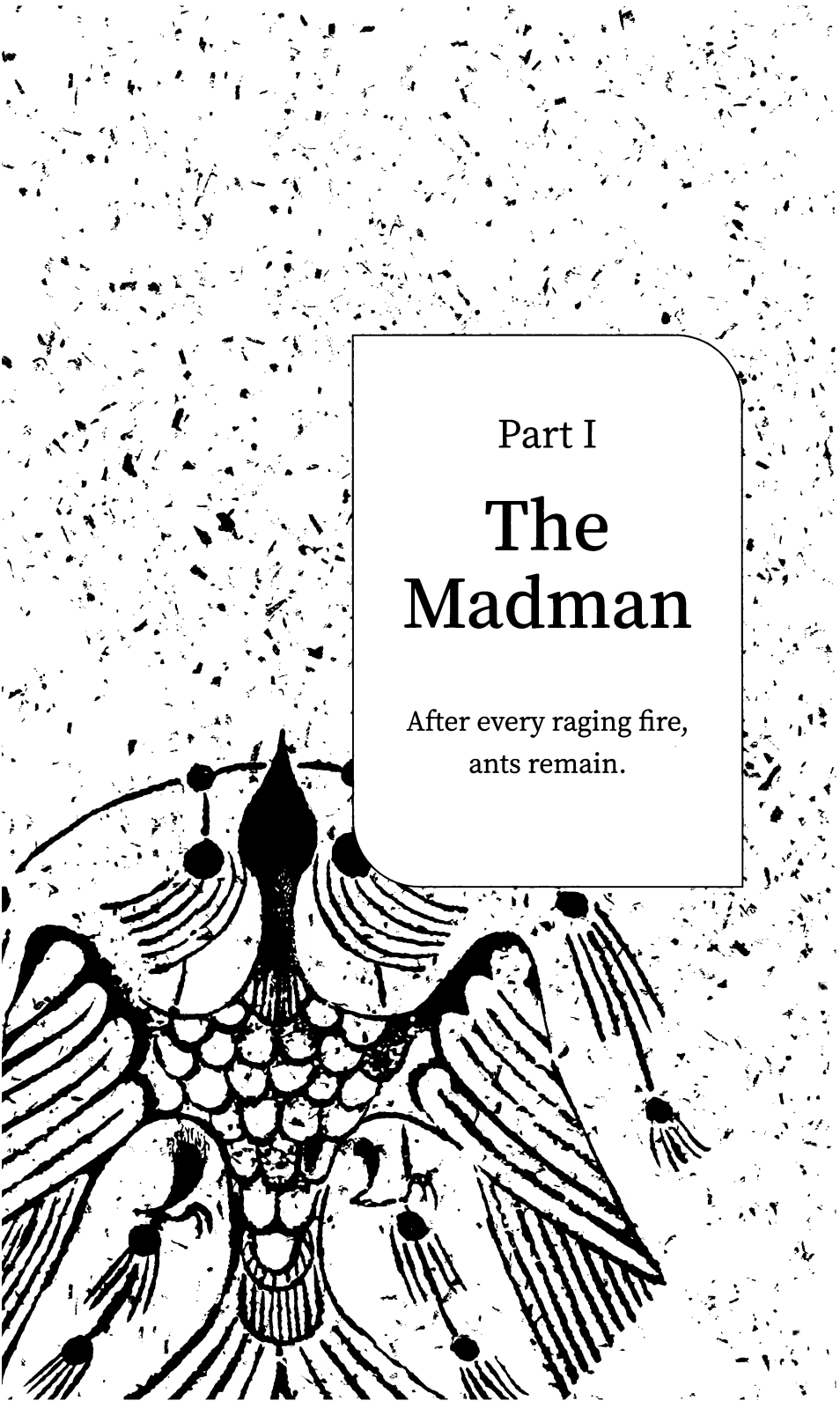
Wait, no... Don't go.

He couldn't remember who he was or where he found himself, but he had an undeniable urge to latch onto that wisp. The noise around him fell away to that one desire. He began to struggle. Desperately.

Suddenly, his consciousness shook, and he could sense his body once more. Then he heard a crack. Feeling wind blow past his face, he opened his eyes. Tears welled up as long-absent sunshine dazzled him. He found himself lying in the debris of a coffin, a cluster of delicate, fiery-red fluff (he wouldn't even consider it feathers) nestled in his arms. It was completely dried up after being buried underground for who-knows-how-long, preserved from decay by a weak trace of spiritual energy from an unknown source. At his touch, the small tufts disintegrated into dust, scattering in the wind.

He curled his fingers and gazed down at his empty palm. After a long while, he looked up, squinting at the dusty air.

The mortal realm... Have I been brought back to life?



Part I

The Madman

After every raging fire,
ants remain.

Chapter 1

Xishan Nature Reserve. Outskirts of the capital city, Yong'an.

After two rainy spells, most of the autumn leaves on the hillside had fallen. Tourists were few, and the only sounds were the serene strokes of drums echoing from the mountain-top temple.

Despite how chilly it was, Xuan Ji was sweating from his hike. He had been trying to catch up to Xiao Zheng, who raced up the mountain trail like Nezha on wind-fire wheels. Xuan Ji sprinted the whole way to the back entrance of the small temple, his legs a blur of motion. He only managed to catch his breath when Xiao Zheng stopped to open the gate.

"Say, director," Xuan Ji grumbled, standing akimbo, "you're a senior staffer now. Can't you be a little more dignified? I've had my heart in my throat this whole time, worrying you'd slip and do the splits."

"Cut the blabbering. I've still got other matters to deal with today." Xiao Zheng unlocked the gate and beckoned impatiently. "Hurry up!"

Xiao Zheng was a man in his thirties, dressed meticulously in a suit. He had the sharp features of a pretty boy not to be messed with. Rushing up the stairs, he led Xuan Ji through the staff passageway to a rear courtyard restricted from tourists. It was empty save for an old well. The director pulled a workplace ID from his wallet and waved it above the opening.

"Remember to bring your ID to work starting tomorrow. You'll need it to come and go."

The well emitted a beep. The limestone bricks around it slowly spread apart, revealing a tunnel wide enough for one person to walk through. Xiao Zheng ducked his head and stepped in, Xuan Ji following closely behind. After walking about a hundred metres down the winding path, they were greeted by a row of stone steps leading upwards.

Upon climbing the steps back to ground level, Xuan Ji found himself in the midst of a forest. Before he could take a better look at his surroundings, a thick fog rolled in and obscured the view. A beam of white light cut through the trees and scanned their bodies. Then, a robotic voice sounded.

"Verifying identity, please hold—*Ding!* Verification complete. Good evening, Director Xiao. Welcome, guest. Please watch your step and hold on tight."

"Huh? Hold onto what?"

Before Xuan Ji could figure that out, the ground started moving, momentarily throwing him off balance. The forest floor turned into a gigantic conveyor belt, propelling the two men through the maze-like fog. The enshrouded foliage zoomed past in dizzying afterimages. Five minutes later, the conveyor belt

slowed to a stop.

"Here we are," the director said.

Once the fog cleared, Xuan Ji looked up at the magnificent building before him. He stared in awe for a while before finding his words. "Wow, that's really something!"

The structure was unbelievably tall, shooting straight into the clouds. Two rows of guards stood watch before the grand entrance, which was decorated with the national emblem and flag. The ground was paved with white marble featuring an animate golden dragon. A large sign at the centre of the compound read, "Anomaly Regulation Bureau Headquarters".

This was the infamous ARB, one of the most enigmatic of government departments, as well as Xuan Ji's new workplace. The introduction from his employee handbook sprang to mind: "The Anomaly Regulation Bureau's responsibilities are to identify, monitor, and manage various non-natural events and anomalous energy phenomena throughout the Republic so as to maintain social order and safeguard the nation's stability and prosperity." Cases such as the illegal entry of vampire bats, unexplained whirlpools in urban rivers, and the three-headed aquatic monster all fell under the Bureau's purview. The Bureau was also the sole sanctioned autonomous organisation responsible for the governance of metahumans. Based on the sixth census from 2010 (internal data from the ARB), around 1 in 200,000 people had metanatural powers. The term "metahuman" referred to such people.

Why did metahumans exist? Official sources offered a scientific explanation: a small number of early humans had engaged

in reproductive behaviour with other species, resulting in abnormalities in their genes. Of course, this theory was difficult to verify due to the incredible diversity of phenotypes displayed by metahumans. Almost every metahuman was, strictly speaking, an isolated example, which made it difficult to acquire a sufficient sample size.

The folk theories, on the other hand, were far more interesting. According to legends, the ancient human and yao races waged a centuries-long war against each other, resulting in a blood feud that spanned generations. The hybrids resulting from the union of humans and yao couldn't fit in with either race. Shunned by their own blood, they could only rely on each other for survival before eventually seeking refuge under Emperor Wu of Great Qi. Borrowing their power, Emperor Wu slew the King of the Yao. In return, he established the Bureau of Peace to give these hybrids a place to belong. According to the stories, the Bureau of Peace was the precursor to the ARB, and today's metahumans were the descendants of those very hybrids.

Of course, anyone with a bit of common sense would know that such tales were pure fiction. In fact, the Bureau of Peace was dissolved more than seven centuries ago, and the ARB, having been established after the founding of the modern state, had nothing to do with it.

In reality, the term "metahuman" was rather misleading. Without specialised training, metahumans were hardly different from their mundane counterparts. At best, they had slightly keener hearing or eyesight—or possibly minor special abilities that were practically useless in daily life.

The ARB recruited annually from a specific pool of people rather than the general public. Their roster included metahumans and people who were on file for having been involved with an anomalous event. Xuan Ji met both criteria; he had metanatural power—and was no stranger to the ARB. That was evident enough from the fact that the cold and aloof Xiao Zheng had personally come to welcome him. After all, Xiao Zheng owed Xuan Ji a favour.

Once, back when Xiao Zheng held the rank of captain, his team had been dispatched to take a colony of illegal vampire bats into custody. The team underestimated the intelligence of the flying mammals, and their captain was lured into an industrial freezer, where he nearly froze to death. At that time, Xuan Ji happened to be walking back from the night market in his flip-flops. He watched the whole thing unfold while wolfing down a kilogram of crayfish. Then he wiped his mouth and, with a snap of his fingers, summoned a fireball that cooked up the (inedible) bats to crispy perfection. He'd even singed off one of Captain Xiao's shapely eyebrows.

On that day, a permanent bond had been forged between Xuan Ji and the Bureau. He even made it onto their top-priority watch list for his uncanny capacity for arson. Eventually, the Bureau confirmed him to be a law-abiding citizen with a clean background and loosened their surveillance. Since he wasn't a risk, they even tried to recruit him. Unfortunately, that was when Xuan Ji had been attending university. His mind was filled with fantasies about becoming a CEO, marrying a wealthy and beautiful woman, and living the perfect life, so he outright

rejected the job offer. He thought he sounded super cool when he told them: "Forgive me for my love of freedom, but I must live my life without restraints."

But then, reality gave him a rude awakening. Upon graduating, Xuan Ji discovered that he was far less interested in making money than in spending it, and his need for entertainment stifled his drive for excellence. After years of toil, his most redeeming achievement was accepting the fact that he would never amount to anything. He worked sales in a small company, occasionally streaming on the side. When money was tight, he would write marketing content for various promotional accounts. He struggled as a corporate drone but could never hold onto his cash. Then, at the beginning of the year, his main employer was hit by industrial restructuring and went on life support. It hung on for a few months before flatlining, leaving Xuan Ji unemployed. To make matters worse, the promotional accounts that regularly bought his content were reported for "propagating feudal superstitions".

As the saying goes, when it rains, it pours. He still had rent to pay—and a pile of credit card bills. His love for freedom had brought him to the door of financial ruin. After being left battered and bruised by life, Xuan Ji came to a conclusion: he needed a stable job. And so, he bought some books and enrolled into classes to prepare for the civil service exam.

It was then that his old friend Xiao Zheng, who had just been promoted to director, sent him a recruitment notice. Originally, Xuan Ji refused to join the ARB even if it meant begging on the streets. He couldn't tolerate the militaristic way its field agents

were managed. But this recruitment notice wasn't for field agents; they were hiring logistics personnel. Logistics work was completely different from field work in the Bureau. More than eighty percent of the department was made up of ordinary humans. Aside from having to comply with stricter confidentiality regulations, they were no different from regular civil servants.

After giving it some thought, Xuan Ji realised that applying for a regular government position would mean competing with hundreds, if not thousands, of candidates—including the cream of the crop. On the other hand, the positions in the ARB had relatively low competition due to the application restrictions. Perfect, right?

Xuan Ji discreetly learned which position had the fewest applicants from Xiao Zheng, tossed away his study materials, and sent an application to the ARB. He applied for the Disaster Response Department, which required him to undergo a written exam and an interview. He heard that, including him, a total of six applicants expressed interest in the posted position. Of the six, three failed at the application stage due to exceeding the age limit, the inability to use the internet, and incorrectly filling in forms. As for the remaining two, one failed to attend the exam, and the other started arguing with the interviewer, which failed him on the criterion of having an "easy-going personality". Thus, Xuan Ji breezed through the two recruitment stages, cutting down five opponents without lifting a finger. He had barely finished introducing himself before the interviewer told him he was hired.

Everything felt fresh and novel to Xuan Ji on his first day. As

soon as he stepped onto the white marble at the entrance, the tiles hummed, and the golden dragon sprang into motion with a distant, solemn roar. Its scales glittered as it swam along the tiles with graceful majesty, making way for the two men. It coiled its body around one of the stone pillars in front of the building.

"The dragon is here to guide visitors. We've got a few public counters for the registration of metahuman abilities and whatnot. Temporary permits are issued for those visitors, and the dragon directs them based on the credentials they're holding." Xiao Zheng led Xuan Ji through the door next to the pillar the golden dragon was occupying. "This is the staff entrance."

Xuan Ji looked down and brushed his thumb across his eyelid as though it were itchy. In response, a translucent, unobtrusive "book" appeared in his field of vision. Its title, *The Yao Compendium*, was written in one of the corners. Whenever Xuan Ji focused his gaze on something, small characters would emerge on the page to identify it. The *Compendium* usually displayed just a name, but now and then, it would offer up more details.

This "book" had been part of Xuan Ji's vision since his birth, an innate special ability. It wasn't tangible, and all it did was provide information. Its origin was unknown, as was its author—who didn't seem very well-educated. Case in point: Xuan Ji had always struggled with foreign languages as a student and tried to cheat on his final exam with *The Yao Compendium*, but he was surprised to find that it knew even less than he did. After a long period of inactivity, it displayed the words "foreign script".

It was like a crappy game cheat that spat out nonsense most of the time—just like it was doing at the moment. Standing in

the lobby of the "centre of mysticism research", Xuan Ji opened the *Compendium* to see whether any beings here were new or interesting. Yet when he scanned the hall, all that popped up in the *Compendium* was a single drab word: "human".

He grumbled inwardly, *You don't say. Of course I know they're human!*

As if in response to his thoughts, the word "human" disappeared. It was immediately replaced, to his bafflement, by "mortal human". Annoyed, he put the useless thing away. When his vision cleared, he glanced around the lobby. From left to right, it was divided into six different areas with a counter at each one. The signs read: Metal, Plant, Water, Lightning-Fire, Psychic/Physical, and Undefined.

Among these, the areas in front of Plant and Psychic/Physical were the most crowded, with snaking queues cordoned by barriers to maintain order. There were only seven visitors in front of Metal, while it was practically barren in front of Water and Undefined. The staff there looked like they were about to doze off from boredom. Without a single visitor to serve, the counter for Lightning-Fire wasn't even open, its staff having been borrowed to help with the neighbouring Plant counter instead.

"Hey, what do those mean?" Xuan Ji threw an arm around Xiao Zheng and nodded at the signs.

"More talking, less touching." Xiao Zheng slapped his arm away. "What do you mean, 'what do those mean?' "

"The zones—"

"Zones?" Xiao Zheng narrowed his eyes at him in bewilderment. "They're separated according to the six major classes.

Why?"

Xuan Ji was bursting with curiosity. "What are the six major classes?"

The two men had been friends for many years. They'd had their share of bickering and teasing, and they'd been comrades-in-arms through life and death situations—but Xuan Ji never talked about his background. Xiao Zheng figured that as a rare fire wielder, Xuan Ji might have been part of a secretive civilian metahuman group. He displayed astonishing proficiency in spell formations and incantations, and he knew about many things Xiao Zheng had never heard of. And yet, he was strangely lacking in common knowledge.

"Based on their abilities and attributes, metahumans are divided into six main classes," Xiao Zheng explained briefly. "It's the current international classification, and the criteria for each category are written on its respective sign. You can read, can't you? Educate yourself."

Xuan Ji enthusiastically peered through the glass window of the employee passage to study these categories. The closest area was Metal, and the two-square-metre sign read:

Individuals who meet either of the following conditions may be recognised as metal class metahumans.

(1) Possession of an extraordinary ability to sense at least one type of metal, including, but not limited to, precisely detecting the metal's location, mass, composition, forging techniques, and surface distribution of free electrons.

(2) Possession of the ability to influence metal without physical contact, including, but not limited to, changing its spatial position,

altering its shape and size, stripping or moving its free electrons, and changing the distribution of its free electrons.

"So, a metal class metahuman is someone who can sense or control metal," Xuan Ji said. "What about people who can turn parts of their body into metal? They're not in the metal class?"

"Never heard of anyone like that." Xiao Zheng rolled his eyes. "How old are you? Maybe it's time to stop watching *Transformers*."

Xuan Ji blinked. "What about if someone's got several attributes at the same time? Like if they could breathe fire, control metal, and fly—"

"That's not under our jurisdiction. Someone like that should report to the circus." Convinced that Xuan Ji was spewing nonsense, Xiao Zheng lost his patience and decided to ignore him. He marched to the end of the corridor and knocked on the reception desk. "Employee number 3-1101, Xuan Ji. Is his card ready?"

"Yes, it is." A lovely girl with a round face was manning the desk. Having overheard the conversation, she smiled at Xuan Ji. "Other than individuals in the undefined class, the rest basically correspond to our traditional concept of the five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—which have a mutually generative and destructive relationship. While some metahumans have control over multiple elements, metal and lightning-fire are mutually destructive, so it's unlikely for them to coexist within an individual."

Xuan Ji hesitantly acknowledged the receptionist's explanation and mused, "Interesting..."

"Come sign your forms and get your card so we can complete your registration," Xiao Zheng beckoned to Xuan Ji.

Tossing the classification system to the back of his mind, Xuan Ji cheerfully took the proffered pen and signed his name on a pile of contracts and consent forms without even glancing at the text. "So this means I'm officially employed and get benefits, right? Do I get a household register in Yong'an? Can I use it to buy property?"

"It does, you will, and you can," Xiao Zheng answered curtly. "But can you afford to?"

Xuan Ji promptly shut up.

"A hotshot like you won't have to go through training. Just show up at work. Details about the department and job responsibilities are outlined in the handbook. Read through it at home. Due to reasons I can't disclose, your predecessor won't be able to onboard you in person. Your office is on the thirty-fifth floor." Xiao Zheng nodded at the receptionist like a stone-faced courier dropping off a package. Believing he'd fulfilled his duty with utmost diligence, he left Xuan Ji with some parting remarks: "I've contacted your department. Someone will be there to welcome you. You can head on up."

The busy director turned on his heel and left before Xuan Ji could get a word in. As he opened his mouth to complain about the cold treatment, the receptionist stood up and spoke in a bright voice, "Take care, Director Xiao. It's nice to meet you, Director Xuan. Welcome to the Anomaly Regulation Bureau."

Xuan Ji was caught off guard. "What did you just call me?"

" 'Director Xuan'?" The receptionist passed him his ID card,

which had his name and position printed below his photo: Xuan Ji, Disaster Response Department, Acting Head of Operations, Acting Department Director.

Xuan Ji flipped the card around a few times in confusion. "The... director of the Disaster Response Department? Me? Miss, are you sure you printed this right?"

"Yes, sir. That's what it said on the document I received."

Xuan Ji was stunned. "Your... I mean, our Bureau seems a bit... unconventional, don't you think?"

A new hire who hadn't even passed his probationary period was promoted directly to the head of a department? It felt like a hasty decision... Wasn't it a bit irresponsible?

"You're so funny, sir," the receptionist giggled. "We'd all be over the moon for a chance to even converse with Director Xiao. The fact that he showed up to welcome you personally means you must be an exceptionally amazing metahuman."

Evidently, the young receptionist was a huge fangirl of Xiao Zheng. Her praise left Xuan Ji with a bitter aftertaste. It felt like he was riding on the other man's coattails—like he was in-laws with an important official and getting in through nepotism.

"Metahumans are a rare sight in the logistics departments. All of them are treated as elite members of our rank and candidates for the position of department director. It just so happens that the former director of the DRD was suddenly diagnosed with a serious illness. He has taken medical leave, so his seat is currently empty. Director Xiao said that you used to consult for us, so you must be competent and experienced. I don't think it's strange at all that you're taking on the leading position." As she explained,

the receptionist led him further inside. "Please, right this way."

"Still..." Xuan Ji frowned and wondered out loud, "What are the chances?"

The most he'd ever won in the lottery was five yuan, and nothing free ever landed in his lap. This sudden taste of windfall was a bit hard to swallow.

Wait... Xuan Ji suddenly recalled something. When he saw the recruitment notice Xiao Zheng shared and asked about which position would be the easiest to land, he was surprised that Xiao Zheng hadn't given him some sarcastic reply like "toilet connoisseur". Instead, the man took some time to think and responded seriously with "Disaster Response Department". Had Xiao Zheng planned this on purpose? But why would he? Xuan Ji had heard of financial scams and catfishing... but tricking someone into civil service?

Xuan Ji's mind raced with questions as he walked into the atrium of the building. There, he saw an enormous tree rooted in a clearing before the lifts. He had no idea what species it was, but its trunk, crawling with withered vines, had to be over a hundred metres in diameter. Looking up, Xuan Ji couldn't even see the tree's crown. The stunning sight had an aura of divinity that made his heart skip a beat.

The receptionist turned to explain. "This is the Foundation Tree. It existed here before HQ was built. Spectacular, isn't it? Now, why don't I show you around?"

Xuan Ji rubbed his eye and looked at the tree through the pages of the *Compendium*, but nothing appeared for a long while. Finally, four words reluctantly emerged: "old tree and

vines".

Xuan Ji rolled his eyes. *This thing is useless!*

Just then, the phone in his pocket vibrated three times in quick succession.

Emergency disaster response mission. Come to the 35th floor ASAP!

Don't dally!

Stat!!!

It wasn't just Xiao Zheng's character that resembled a tornado. Even his text messages left Xuan Ji gasping for air.

"Before I got here, he lied to me and said that the DRD was a bunch of nobodies who had no competition and didn't need to work—just sit around and get paid. And here I get a mission before even reporting in? Sorry, miss, but I won't be needing that tour. Mr Xiao's impatiently waiting. The lifts are over there, right? I'll head up by myself so you can go back to work. Thanks." Xuan Ji bid the receptionist farewell and, on his way to the lifts, sent a voice message to Xiao Zheng.

"You big fat liar."

When the lift doors opened on the 35th floor, Xuan Ji was dazzled. The space boasted a semi-open concept with floor-to-ceiling windows facing south. A glass door in the middle of the windows led to a terrace that extended from the building, overlooking the capital. He briefly scanned the area and saw at least a dozen different types of intricate spell formations stacked one on top of another, expanding the terrace space far beyond its physical limits. Aside from a helipad, the architects managed to fit in an entire runway.

After many years of loafing about in the human world, Xuan Ji thought that he'd seen it all—that it was impossible to broaden his horizons any further. Yet he found himself astounded by the man-made marvel before him. Feeling lightheaded from the brilliant sunlight, Xuan Ji had yet to locate his office when another lift opened, and Xiao Zheng rushed out with several people in tow.

Upon seeing Xuan Ji standing in confusion, Xiao Zheng swept him off like a whirlwind. "The DRD's plane is ready to go. You're leading the team. Take-off's in twenty minutes. Come, I'll brief you as we walk."

Xuan Ji blinked. What was ready to go? Why was he leading the team? He hadn't even set foot in his own office yet, and he was being stuck on a plane for a mission. *Wait... This department has its own plane?*

The glass door opened, and the wind from the landing pad swept in, whipping everyone's hair into stiff peaks like egg whites. Only Xiao Zheng's heavily gelled strands remained unmoved by the gust. He shoved a stack of documents into Xuan Ji's arms and said solemnly, "Something's happened in the Crimson Canyon."

Xuan Ji was flattening his windswept hair, but at the mention of the Crimson Canyon, he froze and squinted as if the sun had hit his eyes. "What?"

Given Xuan Ji's track record, Xiao Zheng assumed he didn't know what the Crimson Canyon was, so he quickly explained. "I'm talking about the canyon itself, not the park—that's the outer perimeter of the canyon. The vast forest inside the canyon

is undeveloped, and it's not open to the public."

"Mhm..." Xuan Ji was slow to respond. "So what's going on with the canyon?"

"The canyon is one of the high-risk zones we monitor closely. There's a massive unidentified energy field in the hinterland that we haven't been able to explore, much less study, with our current technology. Anomalies occur frequently due to that energy field, and there are many traces of ancient spell formations and inscriptions all over the forest. Most are completely unintelligible, and fewer than one-tenth have been deciphered. The Bureau's researchers speculate that something extremely dangerous is sealed there."

Xuan Ji opened his mouth to offer his conjecture about this "extremely dangerous" thing, but before he could utter a word, Xiao Zheng hurried him and the DRD agents onto a small plane. Xiao Zheng took a seat and turned on his tablet.

"Long story short, several trees in the canyon suddenly mutated and started hunting around the forest over the Golden Week holiday. To ensure public safety, our colleagues in the local office asked the rangers to suspend admission into the park, citing a 'geological disaster'. Unfortunately, this tempted a small group of thrill seekers to sneak in and stream their 'adventure'. They arrived just in time to have a run-in with the mutant trees." Xiao Zheng opened a video file on his tablet. "This is what the park's surveillance cameras captured."

The footage was shaky and full of static, perhaps due to an earthquake. This continued until a shadow flashed across the screen like a python lunging at prey. The monstrous sight slith-

ered along the ground until it reached an old tree near the camera. It immediately coiled itself around the tree and absorbed its life force, causing it to shrivel up. In less than a minute, the tree had been reduced to a pile of dead logs. It was then that Xuan Ji realised: the "python" was, in fact, the root of an even larger tree. The terrifying root grew in girth after eating its fill and crawled down from the withered plant. It swayed in the air a few times as though showing off before lashing out at the camera. The screen went dark; the lens had been smashed.

Frowning, Xuan Ji quickly counted off fingers. There hadn't been any solar or lunar eclipses recently. No meteor showers either. Their neighbour Mars wasn't in retrograde, and there weren't any astronomical anomalies. It wasn't a *yin* month or a *yin* day based on the lunar calendar's earthly branches, nor was it time for the supernatural to be out and about. Everything seemed fine. So what could have caused the mutation?

"At a conservative estimate, there are presently at least seven mutated plants. The root in the video likely belonged to a mutated spruce tree. They've spread out rapidly, hunting all manner of beings—not just plants. Our men discovered the carcasses of several large mammals." Xiao Zheng redirected his train of thought. "When they heard that hikers were trapped, our local colleagues immediately organised a rescue effort, and all of them were brought to safety. They were lucky enough to stumble upon a cave and had been taking shelter there. However, we're not sure how much they've seen. Handling these hikers is the bulk of the DRD's task this time."

"Yes, sir," responded the DRD agents in unison.

Xuan Ji was the only one unfamiliar with his post. Confused, he asked, "Didn't you say they've been rescued?"

"That's right," said one of his new colleagues, "and that's why it's time for us, the DRD, to step up. Isn't it our job to deal with personal and property damage, sort out compensation, comfort the affected civilians, and prevent the spread of news about the anomaly to avoid public panic?"

Oh, duh... His new job was to collect dead bodies, compensate victims, debunk rumours, and promote science and critical thinking to the public.

"Sorry, but I've never worked in this field. You'll have to bear with me while I learn on the job." Xuan Ji gave an awkward chuckle and turned to seek help from his new colleagues. "Could someone give me a rundown of how we generally handle these situations?"

For the first time, Xuan Ji got a good look at the people behind him. Three other agents from the DRD had been mobilised—two women and one man. The voice that had just spoken belonged to a knowledgeable-looking woman, probably in her fifties. She wore reading glasses, and her hair was styled into a trendy poodle perm. She was wearing a Barbie-pink cardigan with the lace edges of her thermals peeking out of the collar, painting a rather unique picture.

The suited man beside her was even more unique. He wore a pair of leather shoes that were polished to a blinding gleam. His hairline was on the pitiful side, but what little hair remained was gelled to perfection. The sparse strands were neatly fixed to his scalp, appearing from afar like the stripes of a barcode.

The final agent was a young woman on the chubby side. Perhaps she was feeling hot or just nervous around strangers, but her forehead was covered by a light sheen of sweat. When she saw her new supervisor looking at her, she went stiff from panic and clutched her trousers tightly enough to rip the seams.

Xuan Ji felt hopelessness wash over him. It was a tiring thought indeed, to have only himself to rely on for raising the department's average appearance score.

"Nice to meet you, sir." The bespectacled woman was the first to speak. "I'm Bi Chunsheng. I'm a few years older, so please just call me Ms Bi. Don't worry, we do have a standard procedure.

"First, we chat with the victims one by one. For those who hold up well, we can fool—I mean, *comfort* them. For those who suffer from more serious cases of trauma, we occasionally employ some gadgets, but nothing complicated, I assure you. You'll figure it out in no time. Finally, we make sure to inspect their phones or anything that can connect to the internet so that no evidence is left behind. You can leave that to Qianru—Ping Qianru, the girl over there. Youngsters like her are good with technology. We always get her to fix our office printer when it breaks down."

It turned out that the young woman who was picking at the seams of her trousers was Ping Qianru. She was holding herself together about as well as those seams. Startled to hear her name, she hastily ducked her head, showing Xuan Ji the whorl of fair hair on top.

Xuan Ji made to speak, but the sudden eyeful of hair made him forget his words, leaving him only to smack his lips and

squeeze out his nicest smile.

"There's one more thing you should take note of." Xiao Zheng checked his watch and interrupted the ice-breaker. "The initial report said that a total of five hikers were trapped, and the rescue team detected five people in the cave. But for some reason, the team brought out six survivors, meaning a sixth person had appeared out of thin air."

Hearing Xiao Zheng's ineptly told ghost story, the DRD agents exchanged bewildered glances.

"There were originally two separate groups of survivors that happened to run into each other while escaping. They both thought that the extra person was part of the other group, so nobody found it strange. One of the groups trespassed to film a video, and their device was recording the entire time. After going through the video, we discovered that every frame the sixth person shows up in appears blurry. The only thing captured throughout the video was his voice."

He opened another file on his tablet as he explained. In the video, a man on one end of the screen appeared to blend in with the light. All that could be seen of him was a hazy, overexposed silhouette.

The silhouette was saying: "Me? I got bored of working nine to five, so I might as well go around and explore."

Although they only had audio to go on, the man seemed to be smiling. He spoke at a steady pace, and his voice sounded gentle and friendly—a likeable trait if ever there was one.

Bi Chunsheng mused, "They were supposed to be running for their lives, but this man... seems far too calm."

Xiao Zheng shook his head and pulled up a few audio clips. "No, that's not the strange part."

The first clip presented the bright voice of a young girl, likely speaking directly at the camera. "Okay, we're in. First, let's go around and explore."

The second was the deep voice of a man. "Travelling... It's when you leave the place you got bored of, just so you can visit a place that someone else has gotten bored of. Rather than getting stuck in the holiday traffic, you might as well lay back, relax, and watch someone else do the mucking around. We're the ones in charge of doing the legwork today, and we're gonna bring the feast right to your eyes. To our viewers, if you're enjoying the stream, don't forget to like and comment."

The third clip featured another man, this one with a slightly raspy voice. "Me? I don't think it's too bad, actually. We all go through our fair share of difficulties in our own jobs. Working nine to five is rough too, isn't it? It's the same for us, but at least we're free."

Xiao Zheng said, "The three of them were live streaming before they encountered the trees, and these are the recordings of what they said to the audience. It may be hard to tell listening to the whole clips, but let me..."

"I get it." Xuan Ji rubbed his chin. "This mysterious guy extracted bits and pieces of their sentences to form his own."

Bi Chunsheng's reading glasses slid down her nose. "Are you saying that he's copying what they're saying?"

"Yes, but that's not all." Xiao Zheng trimmed out the section where the girl said "go around and explore", and then played

the mysterious man saying the same words. It wasn't obvious in a sentence that went by in seconds, but when the phrases were isolated and compared directly, the similarity was uncanny.

"The speed, cadence, pauses, stress—it all sounds identical, like the same clip passing through a voice changer. This man isn't just mimicking what they're saying; he's copying it perfectly." Xiao Zheng looked up. "It may have been a coincidence if a few words were the same, but when we compared the clips, we discovered that every single word spoken by this man was an exact copy of something someone else had said."

Me? I... got bored of... working nine to five... so... I... might as well... go around and explore.

"He's our top priority. Now, it's time for you to set off for Chiyuan." Xiao Zheng glanced at Xuan Ji. "Give me a heads-up when you're back. We're proper colleagues now, so let's have a meal together."

It seemed like Xiao Zheng was finally going to pay up for tricking him into joining the DRD. Smirking, Xuan Ji teased, "Are you buying? A little lacking in generosity, don't you think? Why so stingy, Mr Director? If you're paying, shouldn't you treat the whole department?"

Bi Chunsheng and "Mr Barcode" were both seasoned office veterans. Immediately, they joined the fray like professional hecklers keen on getting their slice of the pie.

"Don't even think of pulling a fast one on us with the canteen. If you're going to treat us, you should take us somewhere we can't afford. Now, let's get this over with so we can grab some grub." Xuan Ji copied the unsettling video to his phone. "By the

way, what's the blurry guy's name?"

"Oh... He calls himself 'Sheng Lingyuan.'"

Chapter 2

The flight from headquarters to the Crimson Canyon took roughly two and a half hours. As a modern wage slave, Xuan Ji had only ever flown first class once—a complimentary upgrade due to an overbooked flight. Now, as he reclined on a sprawling sofa with his eyes closed, lulled by the rumbling engines of the department's business jet, he could almost believe that he was living the lavish life of a millionaire.

On his maiden voyage via private aircraft, Xuan Ji was keen to hide his ignorance, so he covertly studied his new colleagues.

Bi Chunsheng, the senior among them, was fully equipped for her pastime, having produced a ball of seaweed-green yarn from her large personal carry. She spread out her array of tools and promptly began to knit. The needles danced in her hands, a blur of activity that soon transformed the yarn into a sweater, nearly complete save for the sleeves.

Once the aircraft stabilised, the older gentleman with the barcode comb-over hurried to the small mirror by the lavatory. He took out a jar of gel and began meticulously tending to his

hair, filling the cabin with fragrance.

The young Ping Qianru sat tucked away in a corner, silently snacking. Xuan Ji suspected that her bag was bottomless, secretly spacious enough to stock a Walmart. She continuously produced food without any sign of stopping, even when the trash bin was overflowing with wrappers.

Since the other two were occupied, Xuan Ji took the initiative to engage Bi Chunsheng in conversation. Figuring that a department veteran would have *opinions* about the abrupt appointment of a younger supervisor, he adopted a humble tone. "It's been ages since I've seen anyone knit by hand, ma'am. And it looks amazing. Is this for the kids at home?"

"It's for the hubby," Bi Chunsheng answered without hesitation or hostility. "Youngsters these days prefer to buy their own clothes. They look down on their mothers' handiwork and call it old-fashioned!"

Having acquired the gift of the gab during his time working in sales, Xuan Ji quickly gathered the details of Bi Chunsheng's home life. She ran a three-generational household, where she and her husband cared for her ageing mother. They had one son, freshly graduated from university and yet to leave the nest. Xuan Ji humbly praised her "simple aesthetic", then purposefully downplayed his status as her superior. He shared his own struggles with living far from home in the capital while making sure his parents weren't worried sick about him.

Bi Chunsheng's gaze softened as his stories stirred her maternal instincts. "Oh dear, it must be tough for a young man like you, all alone out here! You're from the south, aren't you?

Where's your hometown? How do you find the winters in Yong'an? You know, I happen to have bought too much yarn. Once I've finished this sweater, there'll be enough to knit you a hat—what style would you like?"

"Oh no, no... you don't have to, really!" Xuan Ji shot a panicked look at the eco-coloured yarn. Realising he'd overplayed his hardship, he quickly backpedalled. "I'm good with the cold. Actually, my hometown isn't far from where we're heading. That godforsaken place has no heating in winter. We stayed warm by shivering hard enough to create friction."

Bi Chunsheng peered over her reading glasses. "You're from Chiyuan?"

"Not the city but a county nearby, maybe some dozen kilometres away," Xuan Ji replied nonchalantly before swiftly changing the subject. "Do we get sent on urgent assignments like this often?"

"Not often; today is an exception. Our field agents usually take great care to avoid the public. After all, they're the ones most affected when civilians get involved. You know about the 'Fifteen-Strike Rule', don't you?"

Xuan Ji had interacted with field agents from the Anomaly Regulation Bureau and was close with Xiao Zheng. He knew that the first order of business for field agents on assignment was to clear the area of civilians using any means necessary.

Metanatural phenomena were extremely dangerous to ordinary people. To prevent field agents from losing sight of this fact and disregarding public safety, the ARB had enacted a stringent blanket rule: Except in cases of serious misconduct, such

as intentional malfeasance or severe procedural violations, any civilian death which occurred during the execution of a mission would result in one point being deducted from each field agent present—and two from the commander of the mission—regardless of who was at fault. This rule applied even if the shock of witnessing agents subduing a monster caused someone to drive into a telephone pole. Each field agent started with fifteen points. Once all fifteen had been deducted, their badge would be revoked, and they would face serious sanctions. At that point, suspension and investigation would be the least of their worries; if dereliction of duty were found, criminal charges could follow. Even if they weren't sentenced, their future prospects would be dashed.

Bi Chunsheng continued, "The more thorough they are clearing the area, the fewer civilians our department has to deal with. Most of what we do is make apologies. When field agents casually walk away after demolishing a bridge or blowing up a stretch of road, we're left to scurry around, bowing and scraping, negotiating compensation and repair plans and whatnot."

Xuan Ji suddenly understood: his career had pivoted from sales to customer service.

"The rest isn't too bad, but the headache starts when money comes into play," said Bi Chunsheng, leaning in towards Xuan Ji. She lowered her voice. "Our previous director, Mr Gong, left before he hit retirement age. The official statement is that he retired due to illness, but in truth, it was because of something he did. The Bureau's still investigating him."

Xuan Ji could never have imagined that this seemingly trivial,

nanny-like position could harbour risks of corruption!

"In addition to business trips, we keep an eye on public sentiment." As she chatted, Bi Chunsheng finished a round of knitting, expertly pulling out a length of yarn and winding it around her little finger. "We have several high-traffic supernatural forums and verified accounts under our watch. If a topic starts trending, we immediately investigate whether it's just wild speculation or if there's a genuine issue. Suspected anomalies must be promptly reported to the Security Department—that's Mr Luo's responsibility. He has a few youngsters on shifts, screening information twenty-four seven."

"That's me, sir. My name is Luo Cuicui." Mr Barcode approached, ferrying over on a cloud of fragrance. As he spoke, a floral scent with minty notes wafted through the air.

Xuan Ji took a sniff and thought, *At least the barcode is easy on the nose.*

Luo "Barcode" Cuicui said, "Our work might sound trivial, but it's something that requires utmost meticulousness. If we reported an issue when there was none, the field agents would be mobilised for nothing, and they'd scold us for the oversight. Those agents rank far above us. We can't afford to offend them."

"But what if we fail to report an actual situation?" Xuan Ji asked. "Wouldn't that be more serious?"

"That's unlikely. There aren't that many metanatural incidents. The real ones that require agents to be deployed are usually cases reported by the police. The internet's full of nonsense and self-induced panic. Here, see for yourself." Luo Cuicui handed Xuan Ji his mobile phone, which was open to a forum.

The top thread read: *Help! My son isn't acting like himself!*

"They're usually of this sort. We don't strive for glory, but to avoid wrongdoing—this was what Mr Gong used to stress daily when he was our director. He said the DRD is in charge of settling incidents, not stirring up more. We had to abide by this principle in everything we did."

That was when Luo Cuicui felt he might have said too much. What if his new boss mistook his speech as showing off his own seniority? Luo Cuicui promptly changed tack and turned to flattery. "Well, Mr Gong's priority was to avoid offence, and now... well, let's not dwell on him. You, sir... I can see you're different—a young, talented man who's competent and reliable. If Mr Xiao holds you in such high regard, you're certainly no ordinary man. Which class do you belong to?"

Xuan Ji's smile stiffened. He shot a lazy glance at Luo Cuicui. "Which do you think?"

Xuan Ji had long, slanted eyes—like those of a phoenix. When he smiled, even slightly, those eyes curved upwards, giving a friendly impression—even when they harboured mischief. But now that Xuan Ji wasn't smiling or speaking, Luo Cuicui noticed his thin eyelids, the light colour of his irises, and the faint mole at the corner of one eye. Without the cloak of his smile, something about his features seemed uncanny. Luo Cuicui shuddered. Before he could gather himself, Xuan Ji leant back nonchalantly and flashed him a playful wink. The overwhelming foreignness vanished without a trace, as if it had been a trick of the light. Xuan Ji returned to being thoroughly unremarkable. "No ordinary man? What, do I look like I could be an

idol?"

Though lacking in hair, Luo Cuicui had plenty of wit. Recognising that there was more to his new boss than appeared at first blush, he chose not to probe further, excusing himself to use the lavatory.

Having rid himself of the nosy man, Xuan Ji connected his mobile to the plane's Wi-Fi, tested the internet speed, and opened the forum Luo Cuicui had shown him earlier. He tapped on the pinned post of panic and was met with an incoherent rant that resembled the ravings of a lunatic.

Xuan Ji waded through the chaotic text, trying to decipher the poster's point. It seemed that her son, previously an unruly troublemaker known for smoking, playing hooky, and haunting cybercafés, had inexplicably turned over a new leaf. Not only was he attending school diligently, but also ranking in the middle of his class in exam scores—a change so profound it left her suspecting that he had been possessed.

Beneath the post was a chorus of comments denouncing it for being a "sponsored ad for web addiction rehab". When Xuan Ji refreshed the page, it disappeared, likely having been reported. He continued ploughing through the forum. As Luo Cuicui had said, it was largely devoid of serious business, dominated by delusions, creative writing, and clickbait titles discussing the three genres that drove the most traffic: family matters, sex and romance, and celebrity gossip.

Xuan Ji soon grew tired of scrolling, his vision beginning to blur. Luo Cuicui and Bi Chunsheng were huddled nearby, conspiring on a real estate venture in Cambodia. As a prolific

credit card user living paycheque to paycheque, Xuan Ji couldn't contribute to such a high-flying conversation. He put on his headphones to tune out the two "financial tycoons" of South-east Asia and closed his eyes for a rest.

Perhaps it was the comfort of the private jet seats or the soporific hum of the engines, but he soon drifted off to sleep. In his dream, he found himself in a small room inside a traditional wooden structure—perhaps a stage station. The clamour of voices below was just barely discernible. A man stood by the window, gazing out away from him. He stood tall and graceful, clad in raven black robes.

It wasn't the first time Xuan Ji was seeing this dream. As far as he could remember, this mysterious man would intermittently visit him in his sleep, but Xuan Ji had never even seen his face. Whenever he got within a metre of the figure, he would jolt awake as if triggering some kind of spell.

"You've come to experience the luxury of a business jet, too?" Xuan Ji asked from a safe distance. Their frequent encounters in this dream led him to unilaterally regard the dark-robed stranger as an old acquaintance, so he felt free to speak his mind. "What do you think of my new job? Impressive, isn't it?"

The figure stood motionless, like an exquisite statue, unresponsive as ever. The rest of the dream was, similarly, a still composition. Xuan Ji could rant or roll about in a fit, but he would remain the only performer in this one-man show.

"Though it may become as troublesome as it is impressive." Xuan Ji stepped back and took a seat at the table, chattering at his "old friend". "The former head of the DRD retired due to 'ill-

ness' with no clear cause. That, coupled with how secretive Xiao Zheng's acting... Hmm, it must be more than just money. An ordinary case of corruption wouldn't keep the employees from gossiping. And Xiao Zheng wouldn't have to jump through hoops to get me involved, right? Then there's the Crimson Canyon. Why would the trees suddenly revolt when I haven't even sensed anything..."

But then, Xuan Ji trailed off, his eyes wide—through the window, a breeze blew in and rustled the man's dark robes, seeming to breathe "life" into him. A shiver shot through Xuan Ji. In all the times he'd experienced this dream, this had never happened before. It was as if he'd set foot into another dimension.

Then, with a sigh, the man began to turn around—

"Sir!"

Xuan Ji jolted upright from his seat, nearly blinded by Luo Cuicui's excessively shiny lip gloss.

Amidst the roar of the jet, the older man shouted in his ear, "Wake up, we're about to land!"

They touched down near Chiyuan soon after. The members of the local ARB branch were frantically trying to contain the mutated trees scattered throughout the park and had neither the time nor the energy to attend to the DRD crew. In the end, they could only afford to send the intern Li Xishi to pick them up from the airstrip and bring them to the First Municipal Hospital of Chiyuan, where the trespassing hikers were quartered.

The hospital was situated at a high elevation, and they could see the canyon from the car park. The skies were overcast, and moisture hung heavily in the air. Despite the A/C system dehu-

midifying the interior of the car, dampness clung to every inch of their bodies. Ping Qianru's hair exploded into a ball of steel wool. After getting out of the car, she kept combing her fingers through it as she walked. Hit by a gust of wind, she stopped and sniffed the air suspiciously. She whispered to the woman beside her, "Ms Bi, do you smell that?"

Xuan Ji's ears missed little. He turned to the two of them. "Smell what?"

Ping Qianru jumped as if caught off-guard by a teacher's question and stood at attention. "It smells like... the incense that you burn in a temple." After covertly checking his reaction, she softly added: "The wind also brought a hint of... blood."

The wind was blowing from the direction of the canyon. Following the young woman's gaze, Xuan Ji saw the towering rocks in the distance suddenly darken, as if encircled by a foreboding ring of shadows. Alarmed, he stumbled and massaged his brow. When he looked up again, he saw only serene, green hills, the air as misty as ever. Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

"Sir, are you all right?" Li Xishi asked.

Xuan Ji pulled his eyes away and shook his head to clear it, signalling him to walk on. He resolved to explore the canyon after his team completed their work.

That work involved five hikers who were wounded to varying degrees and were looking rather embarrassed. Once discharged from the hospital, they would be detained by the police and face legal consequences. Their IDs had been confiscated, along with their mobile phones, which Ping Qianru was combing for sensitive information. Meanwhile, Bi Chunsheng took charge of the

interviews. As Xuan Ji was new to the team, he refrained from commenting on his colleagues' methods and quietly observed Bi Chunsheng's approach.

He found her conversations intriguing. In his previous career, Xuan Ji had to interact with people on a regular basis. Although he hadn't been an over-achiever, he'd honed some basic communication skills. And based on his experience, he wouldn't have considered Bi Chunsheng a master conversationalist. She was friendly—but perhaps overly so. She occasionally intruded into the hikers' personal space, violating boundaries. Had someone else spoken as she did, it might have easily raised the hikers' hackles. Yet, strangely enough, the hikers seemed bewitched, naturally falling in with her rhythm. After exchanging pleasantries, Bi Chunsheng began to inquire about their experiences in the canyon.

A girl nursing a broken leg recounted with a shiver: "I remember this giant snake was chasing us. It was terrifying. It was the colour of mud, and it looked like tree bark!"

Bi Chunsheng smiled sweetly. "The snake you saw must have been a vine growing from a tree. The earthquake toppled the tree, causing the vines to be thrown about. It might've seemed alive, but a real snake? Impossible. The park isn't the habitat for pythons."

"No, that's not it." Being corrected by Bi Chunsheng left the girl perplexed. She attempted to argue, but her voice softened, betraying a sudden uncertainty. "I don't think it was a vine. It moved so quickly, chasing us, and..."

Bi Chunsheng stared into her eyes and reiterated calmly, "Yes,

it was definitely a vine."

Xuan Ji mused that the knitting lady was arguing for argument's sake. If the girl were less patient, she might have lost her temper. Yet, the girl's expression grew more doubtful, her tone increasingly hesitant. Back and forth they went until, remarkably, the girl seemed to be swayed, accepting Bi Chunsheng's explanation. When probed again, she made no mention of earth-toned pythons or being pursued, as if it had truly never happened.

Surprised, Xuan Ji asked Luo Cuicui, "Is Ms Bi a metahuman? Is she... wait, how do you categorise the powers again?"

"Yes, she falls under the psychic/physical class. She uses psychic abilities." Luo Cuicui puffed up with pride. "There aren't many metahumans in the DRD, but it so happens they're all here today."

Xuan Ji couldn't help but size him up. "Oh, I see. Then, are you a metahuman as well?"

"I'm not nearly as impressive, not by a long shot. My ability's far from practical." Luo Cuicui boasted with a hint of false modesty, "I belong to the plant class. Parts of my limbs can transform into plants. Besides that, my fingers and toes exhibit plant-like characteristics."

"And by plant-like characteristics, you mean...?" Xuan Ji was genuinely curious.

"Oh, they just keep growing! If I don't trim them regularly, I could ruin a whole collection of shoes in a year!"

Xuan Ji blinked. Perhaps Mr Luo should consider seeking medical help for this so-called special ability of his.

Li Xishi stifled a chuckle. Realising his impoliteness, he cleared his throat. "By the way, the sixth individual we rescued, Sheng Lingyuan, wasn't injured, so we've temporarily housed him in the waiting room, just up ahead."

As Xuan Ji lifted his gaze towards where the intern was pointing, a ceiling light flickered and died. At that moment, he felt something cold around his right index finger. He knew what it was: a ring bearing a piece of crimson jasper the size of a grain of rice, unmarred by any other colours. His heart skipped a beat as he discreetly hid his hand in his coat pocket.

Like the *Compendium*, this ring had been with him since birth and was impossible to remove. But unlike the *Compendium*, it simply stayed on his finger, never asserting its own will or pulling any antics. It wasn't much different from extra hair or fingernails and never caused him any real trouble, but its purpose remained a mystery. Aside from its old-fashioned style, Xuan Ji had no complaints about it. It remained invisible most of the time, appearing only when called, so he could usually pretend it didn't exist.

But now, a sense of foreboding settled over Xuan Ji. The whole day had been rife with oddities. First, he learnt about trees wreaking havoc in the Crimson Canyon. Then, the "statue" from his dreams turned around. And now, the invisible ring appeared without his summons...

"Oh, the bulb burnt out," muttered Li Xishi, obliviously pressing forward. "This person is a little... odd. Well, you'll see what I mean when you meet him."

The hospital had been cordoned off by the ARB, so there was

only one person in the waiting room—the man calling himself Sheng Lingyuan. He was sitting in one of the plastic chairs, his back to the half-open door, engrossed in the advertisements playing on the wall-mounted TV. His back was upright, but not stiffly so, as though he had undergone posture training. Even from this angle, he was easy on the eyes. But this man's most striking feature was his thick and luxuriant hair, gathered into a waist-length ponytail with a simple band.

Xuan Ji was momentarily blinded by the *Compendium*, which popped up as though eager to comment. But after much anticipation, its pages remained stubbornly blank.

"This is his ID," the intern said, producing a card from a file bag. "No mobile phone. Claims to have lost it."

"Even young guys are resorting to wigs now. Must be the air pollution," murmured Luo Cuicui. He stared at the man's hair, tenderly touching his own "barcode". "Sir, shall I go talk to him?"

"Wait." Xuan Ji held out an arm to stop Luo Cuicui. With a whoosh, the ID in his hand transformed into a dry leaf and burst into flames, startling both Luo Cuicui and Li Xishi.

At that moment, the door to the waiting room swung fully open with a creak. A gust of damp, decay-laden air burst out, evoking images of decrepit coffins housing skeletons. The TV screen went black, reflecting a pair of eyes that met Xuan Ji's guarded gaze through its mirror-like surface. In those haunting eyes flickered a smile.

The screen crackled back to life, displaying an ad for a summer camp. Children were frolicking in a field—a scene meant

to be light-hearted and joyful. But for some reason, the image stuttered, making the laughter eerily disjointed.

Hee... hee...

The little girl onscreen was bouncing off the walls. Her expression happened to freeze in a grimace that blurred the line between laughter and tears, her missing tooth on full display.

Luo Cuicui went weak in the knees. He staggered backwards into a metal trash can, sending a clang echoing through the hospital's maze-like corridors.

Only then did Li Xishi jolt to attention. He said to the man in a blunt tone, "Hey, what do you think you're doing? You're a metahuman, aren't you? Who do you think you're fooling, using psychic abilities to forge credentials?"

In response to the loud interrogation, the long-haired man slowly turned his head. Xuan Ji swiftly grabbed the rash young intern by the chest and shoved him back. Almost simultaneously, the man vanished from his seat. In that split second, Xuan Ji raised his right hand to shield his neck—just as the man reappeared right in front of him in the doorway. With a pale hand the sickly colour of old jade, he swiped at Xuan Ji's throat. A silvery glint flashed between Xuan Ji's fingers. With a clink, the coin in his hand deflected the attack just in time. It felt as though his coin had struck stone.

Xuan Ji finally saw his assailant's face, inches from his own. The man's eyebrows slanted upwards, while the outer corners of his eyes were downturned. His sculpted brow bone carried an aloof chill, yet his eyes were those of a lover's: deep as a quiet pond, yet brimming with warmth and tenderness. For a fleeting

moment, Xuan Ji was hit with déjà vu.

Then he heard it—the sound of a crack running through the stone on his ring. This ring had gone with him everywhere since he was born and was impervious to fire, acid, bullets, and blades. He'd been sure it would outlast him as a relic for future generations. Yet now, it had broken at a mere touch! The gem's vibrant crimson lost its vitality as a rusty colour spread from the fracture. A bone-chilling cold seeped into Xuan Ji's finger, threatening to freeze his blood solid. Survival instincts kicked in; the coin burst apart, covering his hand in a thin layer of metal. A tiny flame the size of a bean emerged from his palm and leapt onto his assailant's finger.

The long-haired man withdrew swiftly, but the tiny flame multiplied in size, winding up his arm like a serpent. He gasped softly. Although half of his arm was ablaze, the man remained calm and collected. Twisting his wrist, he grasped the flaming serpent and pulled. The fire that had consumed his sleeve became like a worm in the claws of a bird, helplessly coiled up in his palm. His fingers were unblemished, and his palm glowed warmly from the flame. But his black windbreaker revealed its true nature, dissolving from the cuff and transforming into dry leaves and twigs, chaotically entwined around his pale, slender wrist. With a gentle squeeze, the man extinguished the captured flames. He looked down and brushed a hand over his exposed arm, restoring his garment to its original state.

His outfit was a masterful imitation of the clothes worn by the hikers in the neighbouring rooms, right down to the minutest tears in the windbreaker. A clever alteration of colour and

details camouflaged the similarity, but upon closer examination, Xuan Ji could see that even the colours had been borrowed from the other trespassers' clothing. Not a single stitch or thread was unique.

The man offered a polite nod to Xuan Ji before speaking in an unusual accent: "How shameful to present myself in scant clothing."

It wasn't standard speech, nor was it any regional dialect. Caught off guard, Xuan Ji peered at him. The man assumed he hadn't been understood. With a slight frown, he glanced at the TV on the wall and tried again, this time in a broken imitation of the speech he had heard. "My clothes are..."

The next word must have been uncommon—one that hadn't come up in the television programming or the hikers' conversations. Nonetheless, he tried to explain, "Leaves... erm..."

"An illusion," Xuan Ji finished.

With a nod and a pleasant smile, the man gestured to Xuan Ji as if he were the host. "Glad you understand. Please, come in, have a seat."

His gaze never straying from the man, Xuan Ji signalled to the intern and Luo Cuicui behind his back, directing them to stay outside. He closed the door to the waiting room behind him.

The man had spoken in an archaic tongue. Xuan Ji had been acquainted with many ancient relics, some of which were endowed with their own ego and could converse in a few sentences of such speech. Having been exposed to archaic language for most of his life, Xuan Ji could figure out a thing or two.

According to his admittedly amateur deduction, the man was likely speaking in the language of the court used during the Great Upheaval of the Nine Provinces—over three millennia ago. He wasn't entirely certain, since the evolution of language was unpredictable. Sometimes, after a few decades of turmoil, the language of the court could transform beyond recognition. Other times, it might remain unchanged across several dynasties. On top of that, dialects further complicated matters; what people spoke wasn't necessarily the official language of their era.

But Xuan Ji could be certain of one thing: this manner of speech was thoroughly extinct in contemporary society. What kind of antediluvian rock had this man—assuming he even was one—been living under?

At that moment, the *Compendium*, which had been frozen in Xuan Ji's eye for a while, finally recovered from its lag. The pages swayed, and an embarrassingly small line of text materialised, trembling slightly. It identified the long-haired man as a "Heartlace Puppet".

Xuan Ji was stunned. The label soon vanished, and the *Compendium* furnished him with a more detailed explanation: "Heartlace" was a body substitution spell. By inscribing the spell upon a puppet, the spellcaster could manipulate it from miles away. Its actions and speech were indistinguishable from a real person's, and all of its senses were linked with the spellcaster. The puppet could be carved from wood or moulded from clay, its true form hidden until the spell was broken.

It dawned on Xuan Ji that this "man" was no human. No wonder he had such a breathtaking abundance of hair!

As he scrutinised the man—or rather, the puppet—the *Compendium* offered another thoughtful note: *This puppet was carved from a piece of magical jade.*

Xuan Ji did a double take. Was the book saying that a puppet the height of a runway model was crafted with such exquisite detail from *jade*? Surely, a stone like that would be worth prime real-estate in the heart of the capital!

Mr Prime Real-Estate had undeniably handsome features, but there must have been some sort of curse cast upon his face. After looking at it for too long, Xuan Ji was finding it hard to breathe, as if his chest were constricted. He composed himself, lowering his gaze to the man's collarbone, and politely said, "Hello. As it is a part of my job, I need you to explain exactly who you are. What are you trying to accomplish, sending such a valuable 'messenger' to the Crimson Canyon?"

Mr Prime Real-Estate blinked but remained silent, looking at Xuan Ji with the kind of interest one might show a meowing cat. Alas, his choice of words must have been too convoluted for the man's limited grasp of modern language. He resigned himself to using more straightforward expressions. "Where are you from? What do you want? Talk normally. I'll understand."

Mr Prime Real-Estate relaxed against the wall and smelled the fingers he'd used to strike Xuan Ji. Instead of answering, he leisurely asked, "What is a pure-blooded little yao like you doing, associating with humans?"

Xuan Ji noticed that the man's gaze—likely because he was struggling with modern speech—was so intense that it seemed to exude fondness. The warm, gentle voice, the strands of hair

draped over his shoulders... Mr Prime Real-Estate was definitely up to no good.

What is this? Xuan Ji thought warily. *Since when did figurine models start seducing people?*

"Excuse me, but I'm the one asking questions here," Xuan Ji said. "The name you gave, Sheng Lingyuan—is it real or an alias?"

"I don't remember."

"Where's your true self?"

Xuan Ji received only a head tilt and a smile in response. Sheng Lingyuan might have failed to understand the question—or simply chosen to ignore it.

"Where are you from?"

"From beneath the earth."

"Beneath the earth?" Xuan Ji wondered whether the words were literal or held some deeper meaning. Regardless, it was an unsettling answer, so he pressed further. "What exactly do you mean by 'beneath the earth'?"

"I awoke underground, in a coffin so flimsy it had decayed," Sheng Lingyuan said. "Perhaps I'd been plagued by poverty in life."

Emerging from a coffin, huh... Xuan Ji accidentally looked at the man's face, and his heart skipped another beat. He hastily averted his gaze. Their conversation was fraught with challenges, filled with assumptions and doubts on both sides. But if he'd understood correctly, this was someone deceased—*long* deceased, judging by his accent. So what was he? A ghost or a zombie?

Xuan Ji asked, "Was it your actual body that 'awoke' in the

coffin, or was it the magical... the Heartlace Puppet?"

"I was summoned, amidst a clamour most disturbing."

Once again, Sheng Lingyuan answered in an ambiguous way, and Xuan Ji had to wonder if the man had misunderstood the question or intentionally avoided telling the truth.

"Who summoned you, and why?"

"The summoner spoke in delirium, in an accent I'd not heard. My senses were hazy, and the words eluded me," Sheng Lingyuan patiently explained, his thoughtful gaze lingering on Xuan Ji. "After leaving the coffin, I chanced upon the five travellers. My dishevelled appearance prevented interaction, so I secretly followed them at a distance. To my surprise, some tree yao were wreaking havoc. Realising the travellers' ignorance, I adopted their attire using illusionary tricks and guided them to the safety of a cave."

Xuan Ji's eyes narrowed at the contradiction. The metal covering his hand turned back into a coin and began to dance between his fingers. "You understood what those travellers were saying?"

"Not quite, but I recognised some of the words. They were unsuspecting of me, and observing their movements, I partially inferred the meanings. I knew the less I spoke, the fewer mistakes I would make. I merely echoed them, offering short, insignificant phrases that I had comprehended. Luckily, they were agitated, and thus my deception went unnoticed." He then pointed to the TV, which was playing a subtitled drama without any interference. "What amazes me so is this curio. The characters inside are so articulate, and every word is denoted below. Is

it designed to teach children to read?"

"You can read the subtitles?"

"Subtitles," Sheng Lingyuan echoed with interest, perfectly mimicking Xuan Ji's pronunciation. His ability to imitate was uncanny. He cracked a radiant smile. "Not word for word, certainly. But with both picture and writing, I can deduce the meaning half of the time."

The man standing before Xuan Ji exuded a serene, gentle charm. Perhaps it was his true composition of jade that made him seem so likeable at first glance, but Xuan Ji wasn't fooled. This man had awoken from what should have been his eternal rest and was spoken to in tongues, yet he hadn't expressed so much as a grumble. He didn't even have proper clothes, yet he dove headfirst into saving the lives of strangers? Who in their right mind would do that?

Xuan Ji had to admit he'd almost bought into the performance, but he finally identified the problem with Sheng Lingyuan (if that was even his name): his attitude. Apart from adeptly avoiding certain questions, the man patiently gave forthcoming, detailed answers. His manner was relaxed, his responses meandering and unstructured. They were reminiscent of the small talk one might have with a stranger to kill time while waiting in queue. If he'd really crawled out of a coffin after being buried for millennia, only to be surrounded by unfamiliar sights and sounds, shouldn't his first goal have been to find the orchestrator of his revival? Even if locating his summoner proved futile, he should have at least tried to understand the current era and seek out familiar things—rather than idly watching TV in a

hospital and indulging in pointless conversations with a stranger!

Just why was he trying to kill time?

Knock-knock.

"Do you need any help, Mr Xuan? What's going on in there?"

After getting pushed out of the room, Li Xishi had felt uneasy and summoned the squad of field agents stationed at the hospital. The speaker must have been one of the agents.

At the interruption, Sheng Lingyuan glanced towards the door. In that instant, the coin between Xuan Ji's fingers sprang into action and hurtled towards the man's forehead. Its surface was now etched with glyphs.

According to the *Compendium*, the "soul" of a Heartlace Puppet, which was like the CPU of a computer, resided in its forehead. Striking the "soul" with a spellbreaker would immobilise the puppet, exposing its true form and the Heartlace inscriptions. If these inscriptions were found, a counterspell could be used to identify the puppet master. Xuan Ji's good-for-nothing "cheat sheet" was finally making itself useful, displaying the spellbreaker and counterspell. He didn't understand them—but that didn't mean he couldn't copy them.

Let's see who you really are! Stop hiding behind a puppet!

Sheng Lingyuan reacted with incredible speed. But as he attempted to catch the coin, it exploded in mid-air, flames jetting out in a wide circle that threatened to engulf him. Several rows of glyphs from the spellbreaker appeared behind him, scorched into the white wall. The jade man didn't fear fire, but the grass band of his ponytail broke instantly, and his hair cascaded down his back. His illusory clothes, crafted from withered leaves, also

reverted to their original form.

But his body wasn't exposed. Beneath the illusions, he was wearing another layer!

The fire had licked clean the facade of false garments, revealing a long robe. It was predominantly white, adorned with an intricate symbol that was still missing some strokes. It was drawn in fresh blood, and the gory stench hung thick in the air. The man's flesh now resembled stone, pale with a bluish-green hue. The red of his lips seemed painted on, making his tender smile appear even more eerie.

Hold on, didn't the book say he'd be immobilised? Xuan Ji searched frantically. *Where's the inscription for the Heartlace spell? What's that bloody symbol on his clothes?*

Sighing, Sheng Lingyuan extinguished the flames on his body with a few effortless waves of his hand and slowly straightened himself. "Quick-witted, aren't you? Who taught you to draw spellbreakers so well?"

As the final syllable left his mouth, the man closed the distance between them. Xuan Ji parried his attack with a coin, its edge sharp as a blade. In the blink of an eye, the two had exchanged several blows. Coins flew about the waiting room. The smoke had yet to clear when metal began clashing furiously against stone.

Several coins slipped from Xuan Ji's sleeve and spun about Sheng Lingyuan's feet. Xuan Ji gestured downwards, and they embedded themselves into the marble floor in a formation. A sharp crackle filled the air as flaming chains sprang out of nowhere, wrapping themselves around the long-haired man.

In the midst of the fight, Xuan Ji had been neglecting the accursed *Compendium*. But now he noticed that the notes on the Heartlace Puppet had vanished without a trace, like dew evaporating in the sun. In their place, two bloody words slowly emerged on the page.

Demonic Revenant.

Chapter 3

Sheng Lingyuan had been "summoned", had emerged from a buried coffin, and spoke in an archaic language with perfect eloquence—all evidence was there for the man being an ancient corpse reanimated. Usually, that alone would not have posed a particularly great challenge. Death snuffs life out like a candle, and necromantic practices known as "corpse-driving" were, at their core, similar to string puppetry. The dead would dance at the pull of external forces, devoid of their own will, their nervous systems having long rotted to nothing. If there was even the slightest imperfection in preserving the corpse, it wouldn't be surprising to see its limbs or organs slough off mid-journey. Such things were a fright, but not much of a fight.

What Xuan Ji feared was that the coffin hadn't been housing a corpse. Apart from giving the dead the peace of subterranean rest, the ancients also used coffins to seal away evil. The incoherent speech that had awakened Sheng Lingyuan could very well have been some invocation or curse, a forbidden spell to summon evil entities!

No wonder the astronomical signs above had remained at peace even as anomalies occurred in the Crimson Canyon—these events had been triggered by man. Xuan Ji cursed inwardly. If only he had figured this out earlier! And he would have, if not for that useless book with its misleading claims about Heartlace Puppets! Just whose side was that thing on?!

Upon hearing the commotion, the field agents outside began pushing their way into the room. Xuan Ji thrust his hand towards the door, striking at it through the air. It instantly slammed shut, the word "EXPEL" glowing fire-red on its surface. The glow spread into the door and along the walls and, in the blink of an eye, the waiting room was fenced off by firelight.

The ousted agents were sent staggering. None of them had seen Xuan Ji draw the talisman with his bare hands, but they were astonished by its power. What kind of spell was this? Why was the support staff carrying such a fierce talisman? That was against the rules!

Spells such as talismans, incantations, and formations were incredibly complex. A year or two of instruction would barely scratch the surface of the topic, so spells were not included in the regular field agent training program. Instead, the Bureau's research department would utilise special technology to regularly mass-produce talismans they would supply to agents like ammunition. Because talismans were dangerous if mishandled, even field agents had to obtain a licence to carry them. The Bureau explicitly prohibited their use by non-combat personnel.

Li Xishi snapped his jaw back into place and turned to Luo Cuicui in a panic. "If the DRD's breaking the rules so brazenly...

Wait, where'd he go?"

Despite being a metahuman, Luo Cuicui worked in logistics, where he led a civil and courteous life. Afraid of getting caught in the crossfire, he had scuttled around the corner the moment he sensed that trouble was nigh. Only when confronted did he poke his head out and start deflecting blame. "He's our new acting director, and erm... I think he got the job through connections!"

The waiting room was barely ten square metres, and the flames on Xuan Ji's chains had become raging dragons, charring the ceiling black. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken minutes for the room to preheat like an oven, but a mysterious, damp chill was quelling the heat. Moisture saturated the air and began forming beads of condensation on the room's cooler walls.

Xuan Ji had the mysterious entity bound in chains but found himself overwhelmed by the cold. As he struggled to breathe, he began to doubt which one of them was truly ensnared.

Beads of water, big and small, rolled down the walls, leaving behind wet trails that coalesced into rows of writing. This writing wasn't from any language known to the world, and just a glimpse of it sent a shiver down Xuan Ji's spine. The pages of the *Compendium* trembled, as though cautious, then finally offered up a designation: *Dark Descent*.

In the corridor, the sergeant leading the squad stepped forward and approached the door. "Sir, what on earth is going on? I am the—"

"Skip the formalities," came Xuan Ji's somewhat distorted

voice from inside. "Evacu... Evacuate everyone within a ten-kilometre radius of this hospital. Immediately! Mobilise all the manpower available, and... report to HQ!"

Having been cut off by a barrage of imperatives, the sergeant stood there dumbfounded, wondering, *Just who is this guy?*

Field agents had always looked down on the support staff, who had a lower status in the Bureau's hierarchy. They were mostly ordinary humans, and those few metahumans among them tended to have useless abilities. Although the DRD answered directly to HQ and was administratively superior, the local field agents didn't take its members seriously, treating them much like frontline warriors did armchair generals—they hoped that the latter would just stay comfortable and not get in the way.

Not only did this new director add to the chaos by using illegal talismans in broad daylight, but he also started rattling off commands at the field agents. Who did this person think he was?!

Calmly examining the seal on the door, the sergeant mustered the rest of his patience and said, "Sir, evacuating residents is no small matter. We must transport them, house them, feed them—that's not to mention the panic it would cause among the populace. Not even our division head could make such a call, much less myself. Besides, most of our agents are still in the canyon, clearing those mutated trees. We truly have no hands—"

"Luo Cuicui." With no time for any bureaucratic red tape, Xuan Ji cut the sergeant off again. "Call Xiao Zheng and tell him the mutated trees aren't the problem. The true cause of the

energetic disturbance in the canyon might be a Dark Descent!"

Although he considered himself a very composed individual, the sergeant found his face contorting with indignation. "Mr Xuan, we have a dedicated team of experts whose job is to assess the disturbance. Please don't lead the operation astray with baseless conjectures!"

Luo Cuicui peeked around the corner again. "Sorry, sir. Mr Xiao's asking what a Dark Descent is."

You tell me, Xuan Ji scoffed inwardly. The *Compendium* refused to provide more information, even when pressed. The area beneath the title "Dark Descent", where there should have been annotations, remained blank. He couldn't fathom why the stupid book was dithering now of all times, but he knew one thing: at this moment, he couldn't rely on it.

Xuan Ji could feel the malicious moisture worming its way through his joints and into his bones. The chain-bound flames were growing fainter under the oppressive chill. Forcing apart his chattering teeth, he managed to blurt out, "Look it up!"

However reasonable his suggestion might have been, it sounded exceedingly patronising. The sergeant took it as veiled criticism and turned on his heel. Just as he was about to storm off, he recalled something more important and addressed Li Xishi. "You said the person inside—the one with the long hair—sneaked into the Crimson Canyon with dubious intentions. Is he a metahuman?"

"We don't know his motives, so it's hard to say whether—"

"I don't care whether he's a bad guy or not. Just tell me if he's a metahuman!"

"Erm, he is, and it seems that he has psychic—"

"Good enough." The sergeant gave a disdainful grunt, waving his hand as he led his men back down the corridor. He couldn't care less about the cleanup crew's new director, who was clearly in over his head. As for the other man, it didn't matter if he was good or bad. The death of a metahuman wouldn't count towards their fifteen strikes, so it made no difference to the field agents if he lived or died.

Luo Cuicui scurried out behind him. "Sorry, don't go... Please, Mr Xuan didn't mean that, and Mr Xiao hasn't given his word yet... Oh dear!"

Xiao Zheng must have left his call with Luo Cuicui on hold to look up information. With nothing but silence on the line, Luo Cuicui was left lost and floundering. He started after the swiftly departing field agents but then turned back to the terrifying waiting room. He couldn't just leave. If he'd had more hair, he'd be pulling it out. "Can't we just talk things out peacefully?!"

Even while being roasted over an open fire, Sheng Lingyuan was listening to their conversation with great interest. Though the flames were licking at his body, not a hair on his head stirred. In fact, the glow of the flames was casting the pallor of his face in a warm, healthy hue.

"Humans and yao have been enemies since time immemorial," Sheng Lingyuan said in a friendly tone. "Even in their decline, the yao shunned human society and retreated into nature. What's your story? What is a pure-blooded yao like you doing among humans? Have you left your kin in an act of childish de-

fiance? Or have you been exiled for causing mischief?"

Cold sweat beaded on Xuan Ji's back and rolled down his spine like icy marbles. His lips had turned blue from the cold, but he refused to take the insult sitting down. "Excuse me, sir. I don't know which century's ideology you're clinging to, but the nations of the world live in harmony now. If anyone's away from their kind, it's you!"

The chains binding Sheng Lingyuan began creaking ominously under immense pressure. Blood began to ooze from the symbol on his white robe, and the damp stains on the walls deepened in shade.

"Release me at once, little yao, lest you bring destruction upon yourself."

In the next instant, the ends of Xuan Ji's hair and clothes froze solid-white, just as the "EXPEL" on the door burst apart. Bloody liquid seeped through the wall of the waiting room, accompanied by a surge of ghastly *yin* energy that shattered all the glass, whistling through the doorway and windows like a dying scream. The field agents hadn't gone far enough to avoid the shards. From Luo Cuicui's collar, a tender sprout of golden pothos peeked out, coiling up his neck and unfurling its leaves over his eyes, shielding him from the scene. He was like an ostrich with his head in the sand.

Just then, a video call came in from Xiao Zheng. Luo Cuicui pounded the accept button in panic, broadcasting the horrific display directly to the Bureau's headquarters, hundreds of kilometres away.

Xiao Zheng's eyes widened. He swiftly turned to the col-

league beside him and ordered: "Contact the head of the Chiyuan field office and ask him to send more agents right now! Evacuate all civilians from the hospital. All personnel present are to follow Xuan Ji's orders—Luo Cuicui, I need him to hang in there. And I need the Historical Restoration Department on the line *now*!"

Luo Cuicui parroted blindly from behind his leaves. "Mr X-Xuan, M-Mr Xiao says..."

His voice was drowned out by the clanking of chains. The flames enveloping them went out completely, and they quickly reverted to lustreless coins, scattering in all directions. One whizzed by Luo Cuicui's head and embedded itself into the wall behind him, nicking two precious strands of hair as it passed. It took him a second to realise what had happened. His legs buckled, and he fell flat on the floor, where he began flailing about like a beached fish, desperately wriggling away from danger.

The moment the chains came loose, Sheng Lingyuan vanished from the waiting room. The haughty field agents finally realised that Xuan Ji hadn't been mocking them—but it was too late. A gust of icy air sent the nauseating smell of blood rushing up their nostrils. The pale figure flew through the corridor like a plague. A chilling breeze whistled in through the broken windows, sticking to all living things. The instant the moisture touched the agents, it froze them in place, spreading tiny ice particles across their skin like virulent sores. Immobilised to their joints, they could only gape in horror—and that terrifying figure was upon them!

Raising a finger, the wicked entity lifted the chin of the near-

est person—the intern Li Xishi, whose eyes were bulging out of their sockets. He examined the young man, then smiled and blew dark mist into his face. The intern didn't need to know what it was to feel instinctual terror. Driven only by his will to survive, he wriggled backwards and managed to crack the ice covering his back.

Yet, the death throes of a mere ant, no matter how violent, were nothing more than a passing breeze. Ice quickly re-sealed the crack, and the dark mist formed itself into the head of a beast, poised to swallow Li Xishi whole.

Just then, a fireball came crashing down like a meteor, grazing the intern's nose and scattering the dark mist. The ice on his body melted from the tip of his nose, instantly restoring his mobility. He fell on his behind and started scooting backwards, so terrified he nearly wet himself.

The fireball swirled past him as though sentient, blazing a flaming trail. It rebounded from the bodies of the field agents, freeing them from their icy prisons. The sergeant, though conceited, was a man of integrity. Upon regaining his freedom, he wasted no time in drawing his gun and firing several shots at the assailant.

The firearm issued by the Bureau was specifically designed to combat metanatural phenomena. Its mithril bullets would seek out metabeings, veering away from anyone devoid of abnormal energy. The corridor was momentarily filled with darting metallic streaks. In response came a chuckle—reminiscent of an indulgent father faced with his child's mischief. Even the sergeant, a middle-aged man with a daughter in secondary school, was

momentarily entranced. He felt like a toddler again, in a huff with his parents.

In that split second of distraction, he found his wrist seized by the black mist, now in the shape of a claw. Numbness spread from his wrist, and he quickly lost feeling in the right side of his body. The gun slipped from his hand to the floor as the mist slithered up his arm, towards his throat.

"Out of the way!"

A burst of fire erupted in front of him, igniting his arm with a whoosh. Yet it consumed only the mist, scorching neither fabric nor flesh. In an instant, the "claw" was incinerated, vanishing along with the blaze.

Rolling to safety, the sergeant snatched back his anti-meta gun and eyed Xuan Ji incredulously. "Wait... you're a lightning-fire user?"

As powerful as metahumans in the lightning-fire class were, they were exceedingly few in number. Even among the Bureau's field agents, they were vanishingly rare. Almost all lightning-fire class agents were assigned to one of the three special task forces under the direct command of HQ. (Xiao Zheng, the former commander of Team Thunderstrike and current Chief Dispatcher of the ARB, was among them.) The Bureau wouldn't even assign one to a field office, so which HR genius was it who had appointed a fire user to cleanup duty?!

"Keep firing," Xuan Ji barked, pulling the sergeant back to the situation at hand. "Don't stop!"

The other agents also recovered from their shock. With trained precision and coordination, they assumed their posi-

tions and began peppering the assailant with mithril bullets. The mysterious man, unacquainted with mithril, frowned at the silvery barrage. The agents knew the bullets should have been potent enough to perforate stone, but the black shroud that materialised around the man deflected them easily.

Xuan Ji grasped at the air, and the coins embedded in the walls and floor flew back to his palm. These coins all featured caricature faces with various exaggerated expressions. Lined up, they clinked and spun in his palm, a microcosm of human emotion. Then, each coin stretched itself into a chain, with one end tethered to Xuan Ji's hand while the other lashed out like a viper. The moment Sheng Lingyuan was distracted, they ensnared his limbs and bound him in an unyielding embrace.

Once again, the field agents found themselves collectively stupefied. What happened to the traditional philosophy that fire oppresses metal, never to coexist in harmony?! Just what was this strange creature? A lightning rod turned sentient?

Nonetheless, Mr Lightning Rod himself was in a pinch. A layer of fine frost had crystallised on his eyebrows and hair. His hands trembled around the chains, threatening to lose their grip at any moment.

"Evacuate all civilians near the hospital! Now!"

One of the agents hesitated. "Sir, but you—"

"Just go!"

The agent opened his mouth again, but the sergeant patted him on the shoulder. Arrogant as the latter was, he had lived through enough to recognise that this new director of the DRD was of a calibre fit for the special task forces. In a fight of this

level, having bystanders like themselves underfoot would only be a hindrance.

The sergeant gave Xuan Ji a stern look and shouted to his subordinates, "You heard the man. Request HQ to send in the closest special task force. Our immediate objective is to clear the area! Evacuate everyone within ten kilometres! Move!"

Back at HQ, the Historical Restoration Department representative on shift that night was, coincidentally, the head researcher, Dr Wang. At this moment, he was urgently shuffling towards the Command Centre. While his body was enroute, his neck had already delivered his head, adorned with a pair of small, round spectacles, to Xiao Zheng.

It was said that Dr Wang was born in the 17th century, near the end of the Ming Dynasty. He didn't present with any powers per se—he'd simply never died. Having supposedly retired over thirty times, he was employed once again by the ARB and now specialised in the research of mysterious relics and spells. The elderly scholar was immensely learnt, a living encyclopaedia of information spanning millennia. The only drawback was that at his age, everything he did was slow, and communicating with him required a certain measure of patience.

"Hmm. Dark Descent... Oh, it's going to be a long night! Dark Descent is a type of sacrificial ritual, a form of dark art that could easily result in death." In a reedy and elaborate voice, the researcher began his long-winded lecture, making Xiao Zheng wish for a fast-forward button. "You see, it's a pact that can be used to call on evil deities to descend upon the world and

commit mass slaughter. Or it can summon malevolent spirits to imbue the caster with the power to exact revenge. But evil forces aren't something you can simply ring up for help! They'll do your bidding and then demand payment a hundredfold! Mr Xiao, your question comes at the perfect time. We've only just completed a special report on sacrificial rituals. Now, where did we store that... Oh dear..."

"What's the date on the file?" Xiao Zheng asked.

"Oh... it was just last week. What date was it again?"

Xiao Zheng sprang to his feet and dashed towards the Historical Restoration Department's archives, his laptop's power cord prancing behind him. The archives housed rows of crystal cabinets filled with ancient manuscripts, all kept at a constant climate and shielded from light. A small screen on each cabinet's door allowed access to the researchers' annotations. At Xiao Zheng's command, over a dozen researchers began sifting through the files and soon located the cabinet dedicated to the topic of sacrificial rituals.

"You can think of a sacrificial ritual as a commercial transaction," a researcher explained to Xiao Zheng. "There are four elements to it: the offering, the principal, the medium, and the inscription. The offering is the 'fee' the 'client' pays to the principal—or the 'contractor'—which is usually something evil. Some scholars believe that only a demonic force is capable of responding to the summons and becoming the principal. The medium is how the 'client' gets access to the demonic force, like a platform connecting a buyer and a seller. Lastly, the inscription is like the contract codifying the agreement. It's never supposed to be writ-

ten unless both parties have committed to the transaction. Once the inscription is written, the contract can't be terminated. The 'client' must deliver all offerings promised in the contract, and the principal must fulfil its part of the bargain. Otherwise, both must face the consequences of breaking the contract."

"I want to know about Dark Descent," Xiao Zheng stressed.

"Supposedly, that's a class of sacrificial rituals with a specific type of principal—a sealed demonic entity. Dark Descent can be used to break the seal, so it's also called 'Demon Summoning'. In this case, the medium must initiate the ritual themselves. As you can imagine, they almost always meet a grisly end—like a suicide bomber."

"I don't get it. What does 'demonic entity' actually mean?"

"We don't have much to go off of, but what we do have states that demonic entities are 'immortal, with boundless power'. They can be sealed, or they can dissipate over time, but they can't be destroyed by external forces. Based on this, the scientific consensus is that a 'demon' is something like a cluster of anomalous energy—lawless and destructive."

Xiao Zheng found this explanation baffling. "How can a mass of energy conduct transactions or fulfil agreements?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't know. After all, demons and sacrificial rituals exist only as legends in records. They might even be the fantastical imaginings of the ancients. But... there was mention of a 'Demonic Revenant' in a very old piece of text. We speculate that this special anomalous energy could manifest within a specific individual, who either controls this immense power—or is controlled by it, becoming a real, physical demon."

Right, that mysterious man in the hospital... Xiao Zheng's eye twitched. "What information do we have on Demonic Revenants?"

"They represent calamities," said the researcher, opening a scanned image of a mural. Its exquisite brushstrokes depicted floods, earthquakes, plagues, and wars in gruesome detail. Each scene was a veritable hell on earth, littered with a myriad of corpses. In their midst stood a conspicuous white-clad figure with no discernible face, like a symbol of terror. "See this figure in white? In the depiction of the flood, he's stirring the river upstream. In the depiction of war where two soldiers are impaling each other, he's holding a goblet to collect and drink the blood dripping from their blades. This all implies his connection to these great calamities. Notice that aside from this figure, everyone depicted is dead. This mural is titled *Demonic Revenant*."

It's over, thought Xiao Zheng, gaping at the image. *Xuan Ji's going to end up a cold corpse.*

Xuan Ji was not just cold; he was chilled to his very core. His hands had been encrusted in layers of ice as if adorned with a pair of brilliant crystal gloves.

Sheng Lingyuan—the Demonic Revenant—glanced down at the crimson pattern spread across his body, too indolent to struggle. He had a slight smile about his lips, like an experienced cat eyeing the little bird under its paws. The more the bird flailed, the more amusing he found it. He said in a condescending tone, "You should know I took a liking to you when I first laid eyes on you. I wish you no harm, little yao. Leave at once."

Xuan Ji had never considered himself a hopeless romantic susceptible to flattery, but when he heard the words "I took a liking to you", something in him stirred. His heart skipped a beat, lost in the feeling of being wanted, and his fingers nearly softened their grip on the chains. Fortunately, the long-unresponsive *Compendium* chose this moment to come back to life. Under the entry for "Demonic Revenant", a line of text appeared: *Demonic beings are expert manipulators of human desires.*

With a jolt, Xuan Ji's gaze cleared. The demon had actually tried to seduce him! Utterly shameless!

"Tsk." Sheng Lingyuan shook his head in feigned disappointment. "So young, yet so steadfast in resolve. I'm telling you to let go for your own good. I might as well tell you that this ritual requires the sacrifice of a thousand lives. The inscription is nearly complete; I need only one more life as offering. Rather than obstructing me, shouldn't you be hunting down the summoner?"

"I'm scared you'll bite," Xuan Ji scoffed, peering through the *Compendium* at the ritual text on the wall.

For once, the book reacted promptly, and the translated script spread over its pages. Xuan Ji scanned the words. At a single thought, his mobile phone flew out of his pocket and to his ear, with Xiao Zheng's number pre-dialled.

Xiao Zheng picked up on the first ring. "Hey, are you still—"

"Hanging in there, but listen." Xuan Ji must have had a "metatongue", for he started firing off words at quintuple speed, so rapidly that his voice went out of tune. Surely, only someone

capable of transcribing rap word for word could understand him. "I've deciphered the text of the spell—it's called the 'Thousand-Life Sacrifice'. It says the offering due is a thousand human lives, and the ritual must be completed within a lunar month. The first sacrifice must be offered on the new moon at the beginning of the lunar month—and the last one at the beginning of the next lunar month. If I'm not mistaken, today's the last day of the lunar month."

Sheng Lingyuan didn't understand a word of the twittering rap, but he stared at the mobile phone with extreme fascination.

"The sacrifices must die an unnatural death." By now, the chill in the air had seeped into Xuan Ji's lungs, causing him to sputter. "A thou... thousand unnatural deaths within a month can't just go unnoticed."

"Get in touch with the police. I want to know about all unnatural deaths in the past month." Xiao Zheng wasted no time in sending someone to gather information. Then he addressed Xuan Ji, "Are you okay? How much longer can you last?"

"I'm not okay!" Xuan Ji clenched his jaws to stop the chattering. "Where's the damn central heating when you need it?!"

By now, it was past 7 p.m. Less than five hours remained of the lunar month. In October, the days were growing shorter, and the streetlights had already been lit. The increasingly damp air swallowed up the canyon, and the artificial lights struggled to penetrate the thick fog, flickering in and out like fireflies.

If a hiker found himself inside the national park this evening, he would have noticed the unnatural silence permeating the area; not a single chirp or buzz could be heard. Even the raucous

crickets were now still and silent beneath the soil.

"Mr Xiao, I've got the data, but I don't think it'll get us any answers."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see sir, the criteria you've provided is too broad. Each year, millions of people die unnatural deaths across the country. Suicides alone account for more than two hundred thousand. And in Yong'an, there are more than a thousand unidentified bodies every year. Let's assume the ritual requires exactly a thousand human lives as offering; if these victims were scattered across different regions, we wouldn't detect anything unusual in the statistics. And that's not even counting missing persons. The perp could have been killing people in secret, and it wouldn't be that hard to keep the bodies hidden for a month. The police might not have even received a report."

The situation was dire; Xiao Zheng had no time to question why Xuan Ji, a healthy young man, was so well versed in dark magic from the ancient past. He turned back to his mobile. "Is there a geographic limit for the sacrifices?"

"No." Xuan Ji's voice began to distort; wind had risen on his end and began scraping against the phone's receiver, disrupting the signal. "As long as... the inscription is written, it won't be limited to any country... it'll be valid even if you make the offering in Antarctica... No visa required. Borderless like a credit card. But—"

Then the signal was lost, cutting off the rest of Xuan Ji's sentence.

Xiao Zheng's phone had been on speaker. The new informa-

tion sparked a maelstrom of reactions.

"That would make it a global search, wouldn't it? Sir, that'd be harder than finding a needle in a haystack." The first to voice dissent was an officer in External Relations. "Besides, we would need to justify the request and go through standard procedures to access the data. The police have confidentiality requirements too. Don't you think... it's a bit reckless to—"

"Mr Xiao," interjected an administrative officer, adding to the chaos. "I was just on the phone with Mr Huang. He's requesting a briefing."

Meanwhile, the Chiyuan field office was not only refusing to cooperate but was going so far as to shirk responsibility. The staff member on the line turned to report, "Sir, the Chiyuan office has responded. Three mutated trees are still loose in the canyon. They want confirmation: are they supposed to retreat and leave them be? If so, who would be held accountable for the damages?"

The representative from Field Operations followed suit in passing the buck. "Mr Xiao, sending back-up to the Crimson Canyon is easier said than done. The field office needs a stamp of approval from Field Operations before they can mobilise, but... Maybe you should check in with Mr Song first? Oh, wait, he's on annual leave, isn't he?"

"Um..." The historical researcher, who had just been waxing lyrical about sacrificial rituals, sensed the changing winds and swiftly changed course. "Mr Xiao, when it comes to the Dark Descent and demons and such, what we know comes from legends, which lack concrete evidence and have always been con-

troversial. We at Historical Restoration only handle restoring the records; we cannot guarantee their authenticity. Using them to justify a mission might be... might be jumping the gun."

Like a cacophonous chorus of toads, they bombarded Xiao Zheng from all sides, each croaking louder than the last. Not a single one was on his side.

Xiao Zheng was the target of hate within the Bureau, an isolated figure who nobody genuinely respected. But how had he ended up this way? The story began a few months ago when the former chief director of the ARB retired. His successor, Huang Zhiheng, was not only an outsider who got parachuted in—but also a normal human. The Anomaly Regulation Bureau oversaw metahumans who had extraordinary powers, yet an ordinary person was appointed as its chief director? It wasn't hard to see how such a move would cause an uproar. By common consensus, the whole thing smelled foul.

It had been nearly a fiscal quarter since Huang Zhiheng took office, but he still hadn't earned the respect of the proud metahumans. Effectively managing them was out of the question—and so, the Command Centre was formed. Staffed by individuals pulled in from Field Operations, it served as a bridge between the metahumans and their unextraordinary director.

The Command Centre ranked higher than other departments and could, in emergencies, bypass them to issue commands and coordinate resources. Thus, Xiao Zheng's position as head of the Command Centre was higher than all but one.

Xiao Zheng had once led Team Thunderstrike, one of the

three elite field forces. He had climbed to that position through genuine achievements, venturing wherever danger lurked. Everyone had admired him; even his brusque, unlikeable nature had been tolerated, if not celebrated.

Unfortunately, the promotion that Huang Zhiheng bestowed upon him had turned the frontline general into a backseat bureaucrat. And overnight, everyone in Field Operations, barring the three elite forces, turned against him. Some accused him of being blinded by ambition, climbing the career ladder with no regard for his dignity—stooping so low as to become the lackey of an ordinary man. Others claimed he was an arrogant hypocrite who looked down his nose at everyone, his petty nature brought to light by newfound power.

Nonetheless, they weren't children. Though they talked behind his back, they remained civil to his face—that is, until trouble called. Then they would descend upon him like sharks sensing blood. Each added their own word as if determined to read the writing on the wall: the bridges between them had all been burned.

And when it rained, it poured. The call with Xuan Ji went dead with an ominous "click".

The hospital corridor had turned into a massive walk-in freezer, and Xuan Ji's phone, unable to withstand the cold, had given out mid-conversation.

"That's all?" Sheng Lingyuan asked, noticing the silence. He found this lively "speech-transmitting box" quite fascinating. He couldn't understand a word of Xuan Ji's breakneck babbling,

but he was intrigued all the same. "Have you found a plan?"

Xuan Ji wanted to protect modern technology's reputation. Cursing to himself, he casually sent the phone back to his jacket's inner pocket in hopes that his body heat might revive it. The doors and windows in the corridor were all cracked, and from inside one of the rooms, he could just make out the ending jingle of the evening news broadcast—it was half past seven.

Everyone in the hospital was being rushed into ambulances and official vehicles, causing a clamour downstairs. But this floor was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Only Xuan Ji and Mr Demonic Revenant stood locked in their standoff.

Xuan Ji glanced out a nearby window; some patients were hard to move. Even with the field agents' trained efficiency, it would take some time to evacuate everyone. He had to buy them that time. Blinking away the frost from his eyelashes, Xuan Ji tried to think. He squeezed out a smile. "So, um... Mister? As you see, we've still got plenty of time before midnight. I know you've just arrived, so you mustn't have anywhere to be. How about we have a nice chat?"

Anomaly Regulation Bureau HQ.

All eyes in the room were on Xiao Zheng. His anger didn't paint his face red; rather, the more enraged he became, the paler he grew, his lips thinning into a line.

"Um, Mr Xiao," a clerk said, raising the phone in his hand, "It's Mr Huang..."

The clerk could have sworn he saw a bolt of lightning flash through Xiao Zheng's eyes. Startled, he dropped the phone.

Under the crowd's inscrutable gaze, Xiao Zheng caught the phone and put the director on speaker. He composed himself. "Sir, this is Xiao Zheng speaking. Based on my twelve years of experience as a field agent, I'm certain that this is a critical emergency. If you have the slightest amount of trust in me, you'll let me handle this first and brief you once it's over. I'll take full responsibility for any and all consequences."

The man on the line didn't say a word, and neither did anyone in the Command Centre.

The suffocating silence was shattered by another incoming call. A clerk answered it; his voice pressed low to match the quiet room.

"You've reached the Command Centre... Oh? Mhm... Yes, right away." He hung up the phone. "That was the Chiyuan office again. There's been a change in circumstances. According to the agents onsite, the source of the anomalous energy might be in the hospital itself. They're requesting reinforcements and... further instructions from Mr Xiao."

"But dispatching back-up requires the approval of Mr Song in Field Operations—"

"Not if I can help it. Back-up's already enroute." A whimsical voice floated in from the door; there stood a young man, barely a day over twenty. The collar of his dark grey uniform was embroidered with the word "Tornado". A stopwatch hung from his neck, giving him the look of a PE teacher. He had a bright, youthful face. As all eyes turned to him, he flashed a grin and clicked his heels together. "Good evening. Sergeant Zhang Zhao of the First Squad, Team Tornado. The boss... ahem, Captain

Wang's out on a mission, but he heard that the Chiyuan office needed back-up, so he immediately faxed over a notice for me to deliver to Mr Xiao. I'm happy to say that the squad closest to Chiyuan is already on its way."

Xiao Zheng had his roots in the Bureau's special forces, which consisted of three units: Tornado, Thunderstrike (which he had led), and Tempest. While nominally falling under the authority of Field Operations, these three units enjoyed a high degree of autonomy—especially Team Tornado. All throughout the country, it handled any anomalous cases that regular field agents could not resolve themselves. This unit was the most mobile, as its squads were perennially on assignment in various locales. Their physical distance from HQ granted them an unparalleled level of freedom—even the right to disregard hierarchy and act as they deemed necessary.

I can't believe it. Xiao Zheng hadn't expected Team Tornado to openly stand with him. He wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

Zhang Zhao walked in with a smile, taking in the various expressions around him. He handed a document to Xiao Zheng and stepped back to salute. "Captain Wang says you're one of us. You might not find support here, but you'll always have our loyalty. Team Tornado is at your command, sir!"

"Xiao Zheng." Huang Zhiheng finally spoke. "I'm giving you full authority to handle the situation in the Crimson Canyon on my behalf."

Doing his best to stay composed, Xiao Zheng gave Zhang Zhao a look of gratitude. He wasted no time in getting back to

business. "Xuan Ji from the DRD is in the thick of the fight. I need him back on the line ASAP."

On the front lines, Xuan Ji was in the thick of cosying up to an ancient demon.

"The fact that you were sum...*summoned* through the ritual must mean you're at least SSR tier... I mean, someone who's su... *super* significant and respected." Xuan Ji tried to mimic Sheng Lingyuan's accent and tone, but even though he could understand the ancient dialect, it felt foreign on his tongue. Without Sheng Lingyuan's incredible imitation skills, Xuan Ji's words sounded stilted and awkward.

Sheng Lingyuan was bound by chains, but his posture remained relaxed, his smile only deepening. He watched in silence as the little yao shifted his demeanour so effortlessly and theatrically.

Xuan Ji shamelessly continued his monologue, off-key but unfazed. "The world now runs on a ma...*market* economy. We've got access to the resources to solve pretty much any problem. Anyone who resorts to demonic rituals at the drop of a hat usually has a few screws loose... ahem, I mean they're usually a fool. Don't you think it's a bit cringe... I mean, not very befitting of you to respond to the summons of a fool?"

"Dark Descent allows communication between the world's mysterious forces," Sheng Lingyuan calmly replied. "If he managed to awaken me, it must mean there had been a connection between us. Otherwise, his blood wouldn't have reached my coffin and stirred me. As for status, those are just honours from

my past life that I've long forgotten."

"I see what you mean." Experienced in handling difficult clients, Xuan Ji smoothly switched to flattery. "Honours given by ordinary people don't matter. Probably not worth remembering anyway. But it's clear from the way you carry yourself—I can see it with my own two eyes."

"Oh? Can you?" Sheng Lingyuan lunged forward, the chains around him pulling taut with a sharp clang. Dark, ominous inscriptions crept up from under his collar and snaked up his neck, transforming his once-handsome face into something more sinister.

That was when the deserter Luo Cuicui returned, having been instructed by Xiao Zheng to deliver a phone to Xuan Ji. Although he had plucked up whatever courage he had, this sight knocked him to his knees at the top of the stairs.

"Rise." Sheng Lingyuan only gave a careless wave at the kneeling man, his eyes still focused on Xuan Ji. "The ritual has brought me back to the realm of the living, but it also binds me to fulfil the summoner's wish. I am fortunate enough to see the light of day again, so I would be the last to sabotage this ritual. After all, fulfilling a mortal's wish is easy."

Xuan Ji's eyes twitched with foreboding.

Sheng Lingyuan smiled and said softly, "The sun has been set for some hours, hasn't it?"

"M-m-mis..." Overcome with fear, Luo Cuicui couldn't form a complete word. Out of desperation, he came up with an idea; he placed the phone on the floor and slid it towards Xuan Ji, refusing to step any closer. "Mr X-Xiao! I can't help here and will

only get in the way. I'm retreating now!"

With that, the coward turned to flee—but was caught around the ankle by one of Xuan Ji's chains and fell flat on his face.

"Wait."

Luo Cuicui sobbed. "Sir! W-w-we plant class people are highly flammable. We can't be on the front lines! Don't be burdened by the likes of me!"

"What's going on?" Xiao Zheng shouted into his phone as he stormed into a conference room. "I thought you'd flatlined... Your phone died 'cause of the cold? You've got to be kidding me. I'll buy you ten new ones after the mission!"

"Mr Xiao, all of the regional directors are ready to take action."

Xiao Zheng nodded and instructed Xuan Ji, "Photograph the inscriptions. The more comprehensively, the better. I'll have someone cross-reference the images. If it's a sacrificial ritual, we should find similar inscriptions on the offerings. A letter needs an address and a stamp, right?"

"Good idea!" Since Luo Cuicui had not pushed the mobile far enough, Xuan Ji could only holler towards the microphone. "Luo Cuicui, at least make yourself useful before running away! Take pictures of the scribbles on the walls and send them to Mr Xiao. Xiao Zheng, listen—the ritual that summoned this guy is a one-time deal, not a long-term contract."

Catching the words "one-time" and "not long-term", Sheng Lingyuan's eyes narrowed in annoyance—this insolent brat had managed to weasel the information out of him!

Xuan Ji spoke as quickly as he could: "The dark arts are called

that for a reason—those who practise them usually die a gruesome death. It's an all-or-nothing move out of desperation. And if someone's going to such lengths to summon a demon, only to get one wish? Nine times out of ten, they're in it for vengeance. I bet it's someone without much support, working alone. But Dark Descent isn't some parlour trick; none of your so-called elite agents have even heard of it. Yet this person took a thousand lives in a month without anyone noticing? If they could pull that off, exacting their own revenge should've been a breeze. Why go through such an elaborate scheme? Who would they have to be targeting?"

Xiao Zheng's eyes narrowed. "An important individual under heavy protection—or a powerful organisation."

The line fell silent. If the summoner had managed to initiate the Dark Descent ritual, they must have been a metahuman or have had deep ties with metabeings. If they were fighting against a more sinister force, they could have turned to the Bureau's Metahuman Court for help. Why didn't they seek out the ARB's support? Xuan Ji could think of only one reason: the summoner knew they wouldn't get it. Which meant they were either a wanted metahuman or—

Xiao Zheng and Xuan Ji spoke at the same time.

"We are the target."

"I think they're trying to bring down the Bureau."

Xiao Zheng reacted swiftly. "I'll have someone compile and analyse recent case files immediately."

"The Demonic Revenant's already materialised, and the ritual must be completed today; the summoner has to be nearby. You

should check the surveillance around the canyon."

Due to the canyon's significance and its large number of visitors, the ARB had taken extra precautions to ensure that security was watertight, working closely with local police. All hotels and tour buses were directly managed by the Ministry of Tourism rather than private agencies. Only someone with a valid ID could purchase an entry pass, which meant that the identity of every visitor was known.

By 8:30 p.m., field agents from the Chiyuan office had checked every hotel near the park and submitted all visitor records from the past six months to the ARB database for cross-referencing with case archives.

At 9:15 p.m., Luo Cuicui's phone ran out of power, cutting off Xuan Ji's connection with HQ again. Silence descended upon the hospital once more, broken only by the sound of Xuan Ji's laboured breathing and the crackling of moisture crystallising into ice. His eyes were downcast, and his shoulders trembled; he was reaching his limit. Just then, someone scrambled noisily down the corridor.

"Sir... *cough-cough*..." Of all people, it was Ping Qianru, the girl with severe social anxiety.

The cold, damp air was overflowing in the hospital. It scraped down the throat and stabbed into the lungs. Ping Qianru stopped more than ten metres away, gasping and panting. Whatever her metanatural ability was, she was certainly no fighter; with her lung capacity, she might not even have passed a fitness test at school.

The flames on the chains binding Sheng Lingyuan had dwin-

dled to embers, flickering weakly in their struggle to reignite. Xuan Ji was at his breaking point but stubbornly refusing to let go. In contrast, the demon was patiently awaiting the new moon while entertaining himself with the little yao.

The place where the two stood had become an icehouse. In Ping Qianru's eyes, the frost encasing Xuan Ji made him appear frozen like an ice sculpture. She whimpered, "Mr Xuan, w-we found a forum post that was deleted soon after it was posted... C-can you say something? I'm scared..."

"It doesn't have to be this way," Sheng Lingyuan meanwhile coaxed. "You're young. At your age, an ordinary yao would have yet to gain sentience or learn to transform, but you've achieved both. I can't even see your true form. You must be an incredibly endowed yao—extremely rare even before the internal conflicts of your kind. I know how precious you are, what a pity your loss would be. Now be good and leave."

Ignoring him, Xuan Ji forced his numb lips to move and replied to Ping Qianru. "Something."

Ping Qianru was at a loss.

Xuan Ji took a deep breath and laboriously articulated, "Stop crying. I've still got some fight left. Read me the post."

"Okay..." The young woman stifled her sobs and flipped open the laptop. " 'Help! My son isn't acting like himself!' "

The words rang a bell. This was the post Xuan Ji had seen during the flight. He'd only read part of the content before it was taken down.

Ping Qianru knew that her soft voice wouldn't carry, so she edged closer despite the biting cold. After reciting the post, she

added: "Before the thread was deleted, the OP replied once, saying she felt like a failure as a mother. Her child never confided in her, so she'd snoop through his things while he was at school. She said she'd started to find strange doodles in his journal, which she dismissed at first. But the symbols kept appearing, and his behaviour kept growing increasingly bizarre. And yesterday, she found pages and pages of symbols drawn with blood. She posted pictures of them. I'll... ow..."

Ping Qianru tasted blood in her mouth and felt a warmth on her lips. Touching them, she found that she was having a nosebleed. The frigid air must have torn the membranes in her nasal cavity. She couldn't come any closer, so she got down on her knees and pushed the laptop along the smooth floor. It slid to a stop behind Xuan Ji.

Before Xuan Ji could look, Sheng Lingyuan read out the "symbols" in a soft voice, then let out a curious sigh. "How interesting."

"W-w-whaaa..." Ping Qianru instinctively shuddered. She didn't understand his speech, but his voice instilled in her an existential fear. "H-h-h-he just spoke? He can talk? I-is he cursing me or—?!"

Ping Qianru might not have understood the archaic words, but Xuan Ji did. Through clenched teeth, he forced out: "Tell Xiao Zheng the Demonic Revenant says the symbols are a cry for help!"

Upon hearing the relayed information, Xiao Zheng felt a chill run down his spine. "Find this boy and have the nearest field office take him into custody by any means necessary! Now!"

If the name "Thousand-Life Sacrifice" was literal and truly required a thousand lives, it would mean over thirty deaths per day to satisfy the time limit—an efficiency a slaughterhouse would have envied. Moreover, the ritual required the cause of death to be unnatural. A noticeable increase in unnatural deaths or disappearances would certainly attract the attention of local law enforcement. To avoid suspicion, the summoner would have had to spread his activities across a wide area, using methods that made the deaths *appear* as incidental as possible—like accidents, illnesses, or suicides. The most effective tools for this purpose would have been curses, poisons, or parasites.

There were various ways to carry out such a plan. The summoner could have staked out at a transport hub, like a train station or an international airport, randomly cursing or poisoning victims. These individuals would have unknowingly entered the last phase of their lives, travelling far and wide before dying elsewhere—without ever knowing why. Alternatively, the summoner could have manipulated living people, controlling both the timing and means of their deaths, perhaps even using them as tools to ensnare more victims before they passed.

The boy's sudden change in demeanour, the cursed inscriptions he had been forced to write, and the bloody cry for help—all signs pointed to him being an offering still struggling, albeit weakly, against the summoner's control!

"I need reps from Storage, Historical Restoration, the Research Institute, and the Metahuman Medical Centre!" Xiao Zheng bellowed. "I want a complete list of dark arts that can grant someone control over another individual!"

"Mr Xiao, I believe we can rule out poisoning. Some poisons can cause hallucinations or make someone more suggestible, but they couldn't control a person for this long—or precisely enough to make them write in a foreign script."

"Curses seem unlikely too, sir. There are a few obscure ones that can control small animals, but the human nervous system is far too complex. We've reviewed the historical records of the last two millennia and found nothing relevant to controlling humans."

"Sir! The Psychic Class Training Centre responded. They said psychic abilities are mostly supportive in combat. Only the most elite users can exert full control over another individual. But even then, they'd need to stay in close contact with the target throughout the process. Long-term or remote control is out of the question. The mental strain would be so enormous that the manipulator would probably suffer a brain haemorrhage before the victim even died."

"Just a moment, sir. We're retrieving all files related to parasitism—"

"We've located the owner of the account!"

Chapter 4

At 9:35 p.m., the Bureau ascertained the identity of the account owner who had written the peculiar post and, through her IP address, pinpointed her location. The person in question was a single mother with a son in lower secondary school, residing on the outskirts of Dongchuan. The local field agents mobilised in full force.

"Mr Xiao, there are thirteen dangerous entities known for their parasitic properties. Most of these are mutant plants that generally lack cognitive faculties. They rapidly deplete one host, then move on to the next. There is only one entity that aligns with your description—a type of butterfly..."

Meanwhile, in Chiyuan, Ping Qianru was scouring the Bureau's database on a flimsy tablet computer. Although her fingers trembled, she lived up to her name as the DRD's top techie.

"Found it! It's a butterfly, scientifically termed the Mirage Butterfly. Its eggs resemble sesame seeds, and if accidentally ingested, they develop into a butterfly within twenty-four hours. The butterfly then uses a unique secretion to control the human

nervous system.

"After successfully assimilating with its host, the butterfly becomes completely invisible and undetectable by current technology. However, an fMRI scan of the host's brain will reveal significantly heightened activity in the amygdala. Evidence also suggests that although the host's brain maintains consciousness, the generated neural impulses can no longer reach the corresponding effector organs. The Mirage Butterfly itself isn't intelligent, but it has a remarkable ability to mimic. It imitates the behaviour of the people around it, manipulating the host's body to carry out everyday activities. Once the host's brain ceases to function, the butterfly takes over completely, using the host's identity to survive and reproduce, sometimes even for decades without anyone noticing—doesn't that mean the host is essentially watching their own body being manipulated?"

Before brain death occurred, the butterfly's hosts would remain fully aware of what was happening to them. They would be "imprisoned" in their own body, forced to helplessly watch their own gradual demise.

Even more horrifying was that no one around them would notice anything unusual. Most victims would continue to follow their daily routines, involuntarily repeating their habitual speech patterns. They would interact with others at school, at work, or in society, yet even their closest friends and family—those with whom they shared their lives—would fail to realise that anything was wrong. These people would unwittingly exchange small talk with the sinister butterfly, then move on without a second thought.

If the summoner was truly using these butterflies to control the sacrifices, then out of a thousand victims, only one person perceived something amiss—a control freak of a mother, pathologically overbearing towards her son!

It was 10 p.m. in Dongchuan.

A dozen nondescript black SUVs quietly encircled a residential edifice. The local field agents exited in single file, splitting into teams as they moved upstairs.

Inside a residence up above, a worried mother sat in the living room, clutching her laptop. She was frantically searching for so-called "exorcists" online, her shopping cart full of items containing the words "consecrated" and "evil-repelling". Her son—the source of her disquiet—was in his bedroom. Through the cracked door, she could see his silhouette playing phone games while doing homework. With his headphones on, he was indistinguishable from a typical teenager.

She nervously wrung her hands, her shoulders tense. Everyone else insisted that her son had become more sensible and well-adjusted lately, but she just couldn't shake her unease. It was an indescribable apprehension known only to a hysterical mother who lived vicariously through her child.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang, making her jump. "Wh-who is it?"

"Ma'am, I'm here from Property Management to check your water meter. We sent a notice yesterday."

"Oh... all right," she muttered. She didn't remember seeing a notice, but maybe she'd overlooked it in her distress. She got up

to answer the door—but instead of a metre reader, she found several men in grey uniforms standing outside. Stricken by panic, she instinctively made to slam the door, but one of the men quickly wedged his foot in the frame while another reached for her neck. Pressing cold fingers to her throat, he gestured for silence. The woman stumbled back, clutching her neck in horror—she couldn't make a sound!

The ARB agents slipped inside like shadows. But the boy, despite his headphones, immediately sensed their presence. Without looking back, he sprang up and ran.

"Target is jumping out the window!"

The woman opened her mouth in a silent scream—this was the seventh floor!

As the boy leapt out the window, there was a flash. A pair of massive, translucent butterfly wings appeared on his back, shimmering faintly as they carried him into the night sky. But then, a vortex materialised out of nowhere, sweeping across and enveloping the large "butterfly". Three agents jumped down from the rooftop, holding a vast net. It unfurled in the air, snaring him!

Anomaly Regulation Bureau HQ, 10:15 p.m.

"Sir! We have the target in custody! It's a fourteen-year-old boy, confirmed to be infected by the Mirage Butterfly. Awaiting your directives!"

Before Xiao Zheng could respond, a staff member rushed into the room, leaning in to whisper, "Mr Xiao, we have an emergency."

"Speak."

"While accessing the Mirage Butterfly records, the staff discovered a discrepancy in the inventory at the Dangerous Specimen Storage Centre on basement floor eleven. O-one jar of Mirage Butterfly eggs is, is unaccounted for."

Xiao Zheng looked up, incredulous. "Come again?"

"Sir, that floor is protected by a powerful formation, and there's no sign of a breach or any irregularities. Even the storage personnel can't explain how the jar went missing..."

"The dangerous specimens stored there are all Class-1 level, requiring daily inventory checks. How could a jar just *go missing*? This is a severe dereliction of duty!"

Xiao Zheng's expression darkened. The staff member swallowed hard, not daring to speak.

"Isolate everyone in the storage centre! Each of them will be investigated once we resolve the current crisis." Since they could not afford to track down the one responsible just then, Xiao Zheng gritted his teeth with barely contained fury. "Get the DRD team back on the line!"

Back at the hospital, Ping Qianru addressed Xuan Ji, phone in hand. "Sir, I have Mr Xiao on the line. He is asking if you know how to remove the Mirage Butterfly from its host!"

"Mirage Butterfly..." Sheng Lingyuan echoed the term, mimicking the girl's inflection. Then, catching a glimpse of the image on Ping Qianru's tablet, he chuckled sadistically, "Ah, the Human-Faced Butterfly. Now that's a tricky one."

Xuan Ji glanced at the image. The *Compendium* responded immediately, explaining that the Human-Faced Butterfly, upon

sensing an external threat, would self-destruct along with its host. However, it was vulnerable to the cold and would enter a dormant state when exposed to low temperatures.

Xuan Ji shouted into the microphone, "Low temperatures!"

"Thanks for stating the obvious!" Xiao Zheng's voice thundered from the mobile. "To isolate the butterfly through cryosurgery, we would need to neutralise it first. That takes at least a full day. Do you really think we have that kind of time?"

"Well, that does not mean you are out of options. Allow me to enlighten you." Having caught part of their conversation, Sheng Lingyuan interjected. A hint of red tinged the pale edges of his eyes and lips, likely due to the ritual nearing completion. But this didn't add any vitality to his appearance; it looked more like vivid cinnabar against stark white paper—strikingly crimson and all the more horrifying. He continued, "The final sacrifice must perish precisely at the turning of the day. One small mistake in timing, and the summoner will be the misfortunate one. The sacrifice is already in your grasp. If saving him is impossible, wouldn't it be easier to simply kill him in advance?"

"Who's speaking right now?" Xiao Zheng asked over the phone, "The demon summoned by the ritual? What did he say?"

"He said..." Xuan Ji turned up his eyelids, showcasing his magnificent phoenix eyes. Though misted over, they still gleamed as if aflame. "He said that you only need to seize the summoner before the new moon."

At HQ—"Mr Xiao, the infected youth began inscribing the

ritualistic glyphs sixteen days ago; he should have been infected the day before. He spent that whole day at an internet café, and we just got the surveillance records—we've identified a familiar face!"

Xiao Zheng rushed to look at the video up close. In the blurry frame, he saw a moustached man smoking a cigarette. "He's..."

"Sir, he's the leader of the hikers we rescued from the canyon!"

Upon hearing this news, Ping Qianru gasped in shock. "Oh no! The hikers have all been transferred to the county hospital—and Ms Bi is with them!"

Sheng Lingyuan shot a meaningful glance at Ping Qianru before turning his attention to the thick fog outside the window. He smirked at Xuan Ji. "You've only a quarter of an hour left, little yao. Consider this your final warning. After that, I will show you no mercy, fond of you as I may be."

Xuan Ji was startled. *It's only after ten o'clock; how could... No, that's not it!* It finally hit him—the "end of the lunar month" corresponded to the end of the day, but the notion that the day ended at midnight was a contemporary one shaped by Western timekeeping. In ancient Chinese chronology, a new day began at the hour of eleven!

Xuan Ji's first reaction was to say, "Plumpy, get out and notify the field agents downstairs."

Ping Qianru, never one to pick up on subtle cues, replied matter-of-factly. "Don't worry, sir. Mr Xiao must have already notified them. The local agents here are now under the direct command of HQ."

Xuan Ji was at a loss for words. The point of his order had been "get out", not "notify". He'd given her this task as an excuse to leave, avoiding any cheesy exchanges straight out of a drama, like "Go!" and "No, I won't leave you!"

With less than fifteen minutes left, if Xiao Zheng and his useless agents failed to capture the summoner, this place would become the first line of defence against the Demonic Revenant. He and Ping Qianru were essentially guarding a time bomb. Had this girl been wiser, she would have taken the hint and run.

But Ping Qianru was completely clueless to Xuan Ji's benevolent gesture. She was still fretting over Bi Chunsheng, who was with the suspect. "Ms Bi has been working for the Bureau for nearly thirty years, and she used to be a field agent before stepping back to a support role," she rambled, reassuring herself. "Mmhm, with her experience, I'm sure she's fine! We can win this!"

Win, seriously?! Xuan Ji was speechless. *Kids these days are playing way too many video games!*

"I'm telling you to leave!" Xuan Ji dropped all pretence. "Stop standing there and getting in the way!"

"Sir—"

"Shut up and go! That's an order!"

Frightened and aggrieved, the socially-anxious Ping Qianru dared not question her superior. Lowering her head, she turned towards the stairs, tablet in hand. The dense, white fog outside seeped in through the broken windows, rattling the shards of glass still clinging to the frames. They drowned out Ping Qianru's receding footsteps.

At this time, the illegal hikers were riding inside a minibus. After following the sergeant's order to assist with evacuation, Li Xishi was now escorting them to the nearest county hospital with Bi Chunsheng. Once there, they would monitor the group overnight to ensure their memories were fully erased.

In the back, the injured hikers slept in a haphazard pile while Bi Chunsheng energetically continued her knitting. She was finishing the last sleeve of her sweater.

The driver made steady progress. Li Xishi was dozing off in the passenger seat, struggling to keep his eyes open when his phone rang. The intern rubbed his face in a daze and glanced at the caller ID before answering, "Hello, Captain, uh... we're almost at the county hospital. We should be there soon..."

The sergeant cut him off. "Be quiet and listen."

Li Xishi fell silent, pressing the phone closer to his ear. A moment later, he was wide awake.

A car passed their bus, its headlights sweeping over their windows. The young intern looked stiffly at the rear-view mirror. Under the pale glow of the headlights, he locked eyes with the moustached man in the back. At some point, he had woken up and was glaring at Li Xishi with crazed eyes. Next to him, the oblivious Bi Chunsheng continued counting stitches.

Li Xishi broke out in a cold sweat.

Sensing the intern's quickened breathing, the sergeant whispered, "Don't be nervous, or you'll give yourself away. Act normal. The county hospital's been informed, and our people are staking out the entrance. Don't panic or spook him."

Li Xishi bit his tongue, trying to steady himself. "Got it, Cap! No worries."

But unfortunately, acting wasn't covered in the field agent training regimen. The moment he spoke, he blew it—his delivery was stiff, his voice tense and exaggerated. It even cracked at the end.

Damn it!

Unexpectedly, Bi Chunsheng looked up and gave him a reassuring look. "Xishi, are you feeling okay? You sound off. Did you catch a cold?" she asked softly.

Fresh off a close call with the Demonic Revenant, Li Xishi now found himself trapped in a car with a dangerous suspect. He was just an entry-level intern, and his luck couldn't have been worse. He tried to smile at Bi Chunsheng, even as his calves began cramping up from the stress, but it came out as a grimace.

"Tsk, see? I told you to close the window, but you wouldn't listen!" Bi Chunsheng nagged like a concerned mother, "Now you've gone and caught a cold. Young people these days! None of you listen to your elders, and now you're paying for it! Once we arrive, you should go straight home—hey, how far are we from the hospital?"

Through the rear-view mirror, she exchanged a meaningful glance with Li Xishi—she'd picked up on something!

Li Xishi's pounding heart settled.

"Ah, almost there." He cleared his throat, speaking loudly enough for the sergeant to hear over the phone, "Just one more intersection. I can already see the hospital up ahead."

"Just a few more stitches, and I would have finished." Bi Chunsheng clicked her tongue, her expression calm. She casually tidied her yarn and stirred the hikers. "Wake up, everyone. We're almost there."

She drew a pack of wet wipes from her pocket and handed them out. "Wipe your faces and freshen up. Don't catch a cold."

At 10:52 p.m., the vehicle rolled past the intersection and entered the hospital grounds. Li Xishi anxiously eyed the plainclothes agents waiting at the entrance, his palms so sweaty he could barely hold his phone.

"Get off slowly," Bi Chunsheng said as she stood to help the girl with the broken leg. "Those with the worst injuries should go first. Xishi, give her a hand."

Li Xishi's entire body was tense. Jaw clenched, he grabbed the girl and almost yanked her out of the bus.

"Hey!" she snapped, stumbling. "Gently! What's your problem?"

"Be gentle." Bi Chunsheng peered over her glasses at the intern and said pointedly, "There's no rush." She then hastened to help the others off the bus, all the while blocking the moustached man's path. Once everyone else had alighted, she looked up as if she had just noticed him. "Oh, still one passenger left. Come on down, please."

With that, she moved to jump down from the bus, pretending to make way for him.

Li Xishi caught a glimpse of the plainclothes agents closing in, ready to act—

In that split second, the moustached man must have sensed

something awry. His expression turned menacing as he grabbed Bi Chunsheng by the throat mid-jump. He heaved the petite middle-aged woman back onto the bus, tightly gripping her neck.

"Stay away from me!" he warned.

"Don't move!" shouted the agents.

Bi Chunsheng's glasses had been knocked off, and she was forced to stand on tiptoe, craning her neck. The moustached man used her to shield his vitals, revealing only his crazed eyes. On his exposed skin began to appear large swathes of ritualistic glyphs.

It was 10:56 p.m., and both sides were at a stand-off.

"I'll strangle... strangle her! Do it... if you dare!" The moustached man's speech was barely coherent, his jowls twitching wildly as though he were having an epileptic fit. He dragged Bi Chunsheng further into the bus. She tried to speak, but the man violently twisted her neck, cutting off her airway. Her face turned red as she gasped for breath, her feet desperately kicking the air.

"I know what your ability is!" The moustached man roared hoarsely, "Shut... Shut up!"

"Where's the sniper?"

"No good. Can't get a clear shot. The hostage is blocking him!"

"Aren't mithril bullets supposed to avoid ordinary people?" Li Xishi exclaimed.

"What are you talking about? Haven't you realised the hostage is also a metahuman? Mithril can't distinguish between

them!"

10:56:59... 10:57:00.

Each tick felt like it was counting down to doom.

10:57:10, 10:57:20...

"Mr Xiao, the on-site commander is asking if..."

Xiao Zheng's brow furrowed deeply.

"If... uh... if..." The agent stammered, but everyone knew his unspoken question—whether to sacrifice a loyal ARB employee, who had continued to support them even after retirement, to stop this twisted Dark Descent.

HQ was brightly lit, the tension in the conference room thick. All eyes were on Xiao Zheng, with various branch heads watching remotely, waiting for his command. They all wanted him to think of the bigger picture, to issue the merciless order. But deep down, they would mourn the loss, knowing it could happen to any one of them.

10:58:50.

"Mr Xiao, there's only one minute left!"

Xiao Zheng had no choice but to face the inevitable.

They didn't know the exact target of the Dark Descent, or how much damage the Demonic Revenant could cause. Even the Historical Restoration Department had no reliable answers. Whether the Thousand-Life Sacrifice truly required the deaths of a thousand people was uncertain. The authenticity of those horrifying legends and murals was in doubt. But the fourteen-year-old boy infected by the Mirage Butterfly was real. His brain was under the butterfly's control. If they failed to stop the sum-

moner within the next minute, he would be sacrificed before the eyes of the entire Bureau.

"Ensure the hostage's safety as much as possible"—Xiao Zheng's voice was ice-cold, just like the chill settling in his chest—"and take out the suspect *at all costs*."

In the hospital, Sheng Lingyuan sensed the impending completion of the Dark Descent. Looking up at the dim sky, he suddenly asked Xuan Ji, "Are you from the Bureau of Peace?"

"The Bureau of Peace was dissolved over seven hundred years ago." Feeling uneasy, Xuan Ji replied with his own question, "You know about it? Didn't you say you can't even remember who you are?"

For a moment, Sheng Lingyuan stared into the distance, his gaze dissolving into the foggy night as if chasing some far-off memory. He seemed almost human. But just as quickly, the impression dissipated. "I only have a vague recollection of it. Seeing you all brought it back," he said, smiling lazily. "You were raised by mortals, weren't you? Otherwise, why would an endowed yao like you be serving them?"

"Endowed or not, yao is a thing of the past," Xuan Ji didn't bother denying that he was "an endowed yao" or "raised by mortals". Instead, he asked: "You talk about mortals and yao like they have nothing to do with you. What are you then? Neither mortal nor yao—a deity?"

"What childish talk." The Demonic Revenant seemed amused. "In this world, how could there be such things as deities?"

Xuan Ji was stunned. *You're actually an atheist?!*

"The existence of deities is merely a desire of the living," Sheng Lingyuan said. He paused for a long while, then added softly, "As for me? I suppose I too am but a figment of delusion... The events of my past life are too distant. I've long forgotten."

For the first time, the smile that had been permanently etched onto his face faded, and a shadow of cold weariness passed over his features. He suddenly seemed to have lost interest in everything. "Forget it."

Xuan Ji's pupils contracted—the chains binding the Demonic Revenant shattered, sending metal shards flying like bullets in all directions. He was thrown back by the force, crushing the ice behind him.

Sheng Lingyuan raised a hand towards the window, and half the wall crumbled away. He swept aside the dust, ready to leave through the opening. Just then, a few coins flew at him from behind, bringing with them a fierce wind. Without even looking, he redirected the coins with a wave of his hand. They harmlessly brushed past.

At 10:59 p.m., Xiao Zheng's ruthless order was relayed to the front line. Its weight bore down on the mithril-equipped sniper, making his shoulders sag under the pressure. Li Xishi's eyes widened in disbelief, as if he wished his glare itself could condemn the order's cruelty.

"Wait!" one of the agents shouted.

Bi Chunsheng had raised two fingers in a discreet gesture—she was signalling that the target had fallen for the trap!

At exactly 10:59:20, the girl with the broken leg, who had been trembling in fear behind the agents, swayed and collapsed. The other hikers soon followed, dropping to the ground unconscious.

Li Xishi's eyes widened in realisation—those wet wipes Bi Chunsheng gave them before leaving the bus! They must have had some kind of hypnotic effect!

Seeing that Sheng Lingyuan was about to leave, Xuan Ji frowned. Instinctively, he reached towards his back—

Suddenly, electric sparks erupted with a resounding crackle. A massive electric net appeared out of nowhere and descended over Sheng Lingyuan. The sparks collided with the black fog swirling around him, filling the air with a sharp, burnt smell. Sheng Lingyuan was forced to stop, landing lightly in the frame of a shattered window.

Eight figures in dark grey uniforms emerged, their collars marked "Tornado". They seamlessly sealed off all escape routes for the Demonic Revenant. Reinforcements from the ARB's special task forces had arrived!

Xuan Ji froze with his hand in mid-air. He lowered it, masking the motion by wiping the water from his neck.

"Sergeant Gu Yuexi of the Second Squad, Team Tornado." The sergeant was a woman with delicate, well-proportioned features, though her droopy eyelids gave her a listless impression. She was standing on the highest point of the opposite building with a rocket launcher on her shoulder. "Mr Xuan, are you in there? Are you all right?"

"Thanks! Still alive and kicking!"

Team Tornado lived up to its reputation as the ARB's ace unit. During that brief exchange, they'd already launched three waves of attacks. The ivy clinging to the hospital walls shot upwards, sewing together the broken sections of the building into a dense net. But the black fog around Sheng Lingyuan morphed into a large scythe, slicing right through it.

At that moment, a barrage of mithril bullets rained down. Although Sheng Lingyuan was immune to mithril, the sudden onslaught briefly dazzled him. He tilted his head.

Gu Yuexi seized the opportunity to fire her rocket. But instead of explosives, it released a sphere of water containing a miniature Penrose triangle. The sphere burst apart into countless droplets, which then attached themselves to the mithril bullets ricocheting off the black fog.

As the droplets scattered, the scene before Xuan Ji began to warp and twist—it was a space-folding formation!

Perfect! he thought. This Demonic Revenant was powerful in both offence and defence, making him nearly immune to physical attacks. But a technique that altered the space itself might actually stand a chance!

It was already 10:59:30 p.m.

At the county hospital, the moustached man swayed on his feet. The seemingly powerless Bi Chunsheng suddenly pulled her limbs in and slammed her body backwards with all her might. She heard her captor grunt in pain before a strong force yanked her hair. In the confined space, they began to scuffle.

Bi Chunsheng yelled hoarsely, "You're out of strength!"

The man instinctively loosened his grip. But then he unleashed a feral roar, his features contorting monstrously as he made a desperate grab for her throat. There were only ten seconds left before the beginning of the next lunar month!

Ten, nine, eight...

Time was running out!

The minibus abruptly jolted. A physical class agent had slipped close and grabbed hold of one of the wheels. Veins bulging, he let out a howl and heaved the multi-ton vehicle, causing it to shake violently. The exhausted suspect immediately lost his balance!

Five, four...

In a last-ditch effort, the moustached man propped himself against the door and, with the last of his strength, lifted Bi Chunsheng up!

Two...

A knitting needle came flying out of nowhere and cruelly pierced the man's wrist. He screamed in agony and released his grip!

One...

Bi Chunsheng fell to the ground and rolled away, coughing and gasping for breath. A flash of silver tore through the night sky as a gleaming bullet embedded itself in the moustached man's forehead.

It was eleven!

The bullet exploded, engulfing his body in blinding silver light.

At the First Municipal Hospital of Chiyuan, Sheng Lingyuan shot out of the broken window, vanishing in a flash. He reappeared in front of Gu Yuexi on the opposite building, but just as he reached for her, he suddenly found himself back at the window.

The formation had warped the space into one of a higher dimension, trapping Sheng Lingyuan inside an infinite spatial loop.

For a moment, there was only silence.

At HQ, that silence was finally broken by someone's voice.

"Mr Xiao, the boy's alive! All vitals are stable. We're ready to take him to the cryosurgery chamber."

Xiao Zheng staggered with relief—they'd made it in time. The Dark Descent had been interrupted!

Back at the county hospital, Li Xishi's legs gave out. His metanatural ability had always been rather useless, only allowing him to move small objects from a distance. Despite being a field agent, he could only play a support role in operations. That flying knitting needle had been his first-ever successful attack. He was drenched in sweat from the tension and completely exhausted.

Bi Chunsheng, still struggling to catch her breath on the ground, gave him a thumbs up from afar.

At the First Municipal Hospital of Chiyuan, a Tornado agent's electronic watch showed exactly 11:00 p.m. They had captured the Demonic Revenant—but Gu Yuexi's gaze lingered on Sheng Lingyuan, her expression solemn and perplexed. She

sensed that something was off.

Xuan Ji had barely caught his breath when he heard a soft voice from the stairwell. "Mr Xuan! News from the county hospital—we've taken out the summoner!" It was Ping Qianru.

Xuan Ji stumbled. "Why are you still here?! Didn't I tell you to leave and not to get in the way?"

Ping Qianru looked puzzled. "B-but you're my boss. With you here, where else would I go? Even Mr Luo is on standby downstairs."

"You..." Something about her response bothered Xuan Ji. But before he could think it over, a wave of alarm washed over him.

Then he heard a faint laugh, followed by Gu Yuexi's urgent shout. "Everyone, retreat!"

Xuan Ji saw the horror on her face. In the space-folding formation, Sheng Lingyuan's bloodstained white robe was now covered in ritualistic inscriptions so dense, he looked like he was wearing dark ceremonial attire. The air trembled as a massive black vortex rose from the rooftop. Murky clouds rolled in with flashing lightning and booming thunder, swallowing the waning stars.

Streetlights flickered and dimmed like candles in a storm. Birds that had been hiding in the canyon erupted into the sky, frantically escaping in flocks.

Sheng Lingyuan chuckled softly, glancing at Xuan Ji from afar. "I had intended to spare you, but you just don't know your place."

Even as he spoke, the formation trapping him began to reveal its true form. Everything inside twisted like a ball of kneaded

clay. With a shattering sound, the space collapsed!

Immediately after, thick black fog spilt forth, consuming all light and life. Grass, greenery, and even the snails on the walls—all were silently engulfed by the fog, rapidly decaying and withering away.

Demonic Revenants were calamities personified. In the face of such power, everyone—local agents and elite forces alike—became defenceless ants, scrambling for their lives in overwhelming fear.

Xuan Ji's sense of smell was weakened by his frozen sinuses. But strangely, amidst the terrifying murderous aura, he caught an unexpected scent. It was clean, warm, and luxurious, reminiscent of a cosy palace on a snowy night.

Chapter 5

Concentrated bolts of lightning struck down in quick succession over Yong'an's Xishan. Some hit the ARB headquarters directly, but its lightning rods and formations absorbed the impact. Outside, the sky flashed a blinding white, with thunder following moments later like long-suppressed fury finally getting to roar.

The golden dragon, which had been lying placidly in the floor tiles by the entryway, was so startled that it darted into a corner. It plastered itself to the wall like a giant gecko, frozen with fear.

"What's going on? A sudden thunderstorm?"

"There's an anti-lightning formation beneath Xishan. This shouldn't be..."

"Wait. What... What's that?"

Another searing flash swept across the building, the light transforming everything inside—people and objects alike—into overexposed silhouettes. When their eyes finally adjusted, the ARB employees noticed something moving along the walls.

"Is that... blood?"

A thick fluid had begun to trickle down the walls, gradually forming eerie patterns... No, not patterns. They were glyphs.

The bloody writing spread quickly in all directions, filling the air with the stench of decay. Someone muttered under their breath, "An inscription... This... This looks like the inscription for Dark Descent..."

"But the last sacrifice didn't die... We made it in time, didn't we? We killed the suspect and saved the victim. Wasn't the Dark Descent interrupted?"

"Are you sure it's Dark Descent? This isn't some different ritual, is it? What if... there are two Dark Descent rituals happening at the same time?"

"Regardless, why is this inscription here at HQ in the first place?!"

"Mr Xiao," a dispatcher burst into the conference room, "it's not just us—all the branch offices are reporting similar occurrences!" He sighed, "Haaaah... Dr Wang! We haven't assessed the danger level yet. Why are you down here again?!"

In the chaos, Dr Wang from the Historical Restoration Department had shuffled over to the wall, all but pressing his face against the bloody writing. Hearing his name, he turned. His glasses magnified his already bulging eyes, making him look like an old dragonfly heralding bad news.

"This inscription..." Dr Wang croaked, "This is the bloody inscription of the Dark Descent!"

"What?"

"Mr Xiao, the Dark Descent has succeeded! A thousand living sacrifices were offered, the inscription was completed, and

the spellcaster has summoned the fabled Demonic Revenant. He has descended upon us and, at the turn of the day, has regained his full power. Tonight, he must fulfil his pact. Wherever these bloody letters appear... That is his target!"

Xiao Zheng froze for a moment, his pupils shrinking. "Xuan Ji!"

At the First Municipal Hospital of Chiyuan, Gu Yuexi watched helplessly as Xuan Ji was engulfed by the black mist. But she barely had time to react with any emotion, for it was her turn next. The breath of death was at her back within moments, and she could almost feel her blood run cold. Her life flashed before her eyes, heedless of her will...

At that instant, a strange sound reached her ears—like the striking of a match.

A small flame burst from the black mist's deathly stillness, piercing through like an arrow. Gu Yuexi dropped to the floor and rolled away as fast as she could. Biting air rushed into her lungs. She whipped her head around, her pupils shrinking as a sword's gleam cut across her vision. To her astonishment, Xuan Ji had not perished within the deathly fog.

Coronas of fiery light surrounded the pupils of his upturned gaze, and a blazing red totem had appeared between his brows. With the transformation, the frost encasing him instantly became vapour.

Xuan Ji was holding a greatsword spanning nearly two hands in breadth, flame patterns etched along its blade. With one slash, he tore through the Demonic Revenant's thick mist, fire-

light sweeping outward in all directions. The deathly domain shattered in an instant.

For a moment, Gu Yuexi thought she was gazing upon one of the ancient deities or demons of legend.

From the black clouds gathering above the hospital, a thunderous bolt of lightning struck, ripping through the fog and illuminating half the sky. Caught off guard, Sheng Lingyuan could only clamp the advancing greatsword between his hands. The Dark Descent inscription on his sleeves recoiled as though meeting their natural predator, quickly dissipating to reveal the pale fabric underneath.

Xuan Ji slammed his weapon downward, driving the Demonic Revenant through the floors of the hospital building. They crashed through the second storey, then the first, landing in a shower of rubble in the ground floor outpatient hall. Xuan Ji's swordsmanship was bold, arrogant, and unrestrained—nothing like his typically smooth, amiable personality. Gone without a trace was that timid little quail from their earlier battle, desperately holding on through clenched teeth.

"Thirty-sixth Patriarch of the Keepers of the Austral Flames. I wasn't trying to be secretive on purpose, but I had no intention of revealing my lifebound sword in front of mortals." Xuan Ji forced his blade forward another few centimetres, the firelight nearly brushing Sheng Lingyuan's face. He smiled. "Apologies, senior."

With a sizzle, the greatsword managed to lightly scorch Sheng Lingyuan's hands, which had been impervious to both fire and water.

The Demonic Revenant's gentle composure cracked, and his gaze grew vicious. "Insolence!"

Black mist surged from Sheng Lingyuan's feet, taking the shape of the head of a beast. It roared and lunged forward to bite Xuan Ji.

Xuan Ji neither dodged nor flinched, not even sparing a glance at the fangs above him. The flames on his greatsword flared violently as he aimed straight for Sheng Lingyuan's throat. Neither held back, clearly intent on mutual destruction, as though gambling on who would kill the other first.

Brimming with murderous intent, the mist brushed against Xuan Ji's hair just as his greatsword touched the Demonic Revenant's collar—

At that moment, the invisible ring on Xuan Ji's hand suddenly appeared. Before he could make sense of it, the previously cracked gemstone exploded into countless shards like a burst of crimson light.

Xuan Ji felt a sharp pain in his chest, as if an invisible blade had pierced right through it. He didn't even have the strength to groan before his vision went dark and his limbs gave way, sending him to his knees. This time, it was real, without an ounce of theatrics involved.

At the same time, the black mist beast howled in agony before dissipating. Sheng Lingyuan was struck by an unseen force, stumbling back a few steps. Everywhere the gem shards had touched on his hand was seared black.

For a moment, the two of them stood in silence, one kneeling, the other standing. Both were bewildered, sensing some

strange, hidden connection between them... a bond neither could resist.

It wasn't until a long while later that Sheng Lingyuan clenched his trembling, injured hand, raised his sleeve, and muffled a cough. His face had turned even paler. He cast an unfathomable look at Xuan Ji before leaping out of the window behind him. In the blink of an eye, he disappeared from sight.

Xuan Ji did not give chase—he was out of energy, and this time, it was no act.

Supporting himself with the greatsword, he tried three times to stand, eventually giving up and staying on his knees, catching his breath. Looking down, he noticed the now-visible ring on his hand. All that was left of it was a shabby band with an empty mount. With a light flick, it slipped right off his finger. The ring that had been a part of him his whole life simply fell away for no apparent reason.

It was as though the ring had been lying dormant for years, only so it could kick him into a pit at the worst possible moment.

Xuan Ji was left thoroughly bewildered. "What is this? What on earth did the Dark Descent summon? A debt collector here to claim our ancestors' dues or something?" But the sacrifice infected by the butterfly hadn't died, and the summoner had already been taken out... He froze. *Unless... that moustached guy was never the summoner!*

Right. Those trespassing tourists had only ventured into the Crimson Canyon *after* the mutant trees showed up. The Demonic Revenant had even said he'd helped them, which meant

he'd met the moustached guy! But no one could ever know for sure what Dark Descent would call—if that man were the spellcaster, he would have kept a safe distance from the summoned entity until the contract was complete. Demons were notorious for their unpredictability. If a demon's rest had been disturbed by the ritual, he could have easily killed his summoner out of annoyance alone before the ritual was finished.

Then there was that boy infected by the Mirage Butterfly. How had he still been able to use an inscription to plead for help after being parasitised by the butterfly? Couldn't he have just shouted or written something down instead?

Even if, for some mysterious reason, the boy couldn't will his body to scream or write after becoming a sacrifice—if he could only communicate through an inscription—why would he choose to write a cry for help in his diary? Wasn't a diary supposed to be personal? Writing a cry for help in a book meant only for the writer's eyes... As if that made any sense!

Someone had been stringing them along from the very start!

Looking at it from another angle, if no one found out about the ritual, the spellcaster could have completed the Thousand-Life Sacrifice undisturbed. But whatever Demonic Revenant was summoned would have been pretty much random. Once awakened by Dark Descent, the demon might not have been willing to cooperate with the summoner and keep a low profile. What if the demon's arrival caused too big of a ruckus and caught the Anomaly Regulation Bureau's attention? Then the field agents, having little information to go on, would naturally begin by searching for ritualistic inscriptions—only to step

right into the trap laid for them. That poor kid infected by the Mirage Butterfly was like a "firewall" designed to mislead them towards the wrong suspect.

The actual final sacrifice had been the moustached man himself!

The Demonic Revenant had watched this play out, knowing all along that they were being led astray!

The spellcaster needed to ensure that the moustached man died precisely at eleven, so they had to be at the scene, close to the target. What's more, this person must have had a metanatural ability that allowed them to manipulate others—perhaps even those infected by the Mirage Butterfly—into obediently following the script they had prepared.

Xuan Ji realised where the oddity lay in what Ping Qianru had said earlier. Her exact words had been: "But you're my boss. With you here, where else would I go? Even Mr Luo is on standby downstairs." Three members of the DRD had flown out here with him. While the local field agents were busy dealing with the chaos in the hospital, everyone's first instinct should have been to stick close to their direct superior and await instructions. In fact, that would have been the natural response.

Plumpy had been standing by the door the whole time. Even the terrified Luo Cuicui had been pacing downstairs, awaiting orders. But in all that time, there was one particular person who had not shown up.

She'd known that the focus of their mission had been Sheng Lingyuan, yet she hadn't even looked at him when they'd arrived at the hospital. Instead, she'd immediately dived into her

"urgent" tasks, then took it upon herself to escort the trespassing tourists away. She hadn't even bothered to inform her new superior that she was leaving—an unforgivable faux pas in the workplace that even the most clueless intern wouldn't have committed.

It wasn't that she had low EQ or wasn't afraid of offending her boss—she'd known that Xuan Ji was confronting the Demonic Revenant and feared that if she met the demon too soon, her cover would be blown!

Bi. Chun. Sheng!

"Mr Xuan!" Just then, a soft whimper came from behind. Luo Cuicui poked his head through the shattered window of the hospital pharmacy, nervously scanning the area to confirm that the Demonic Revenant had indeed gone before crawling out on all fours.

Limbs covered in pothos vines, he looked like an avant-garde houseplant as he ran to help Xuan Ji to his feet.

Xuan Ji grabbed him. "Where's Bi Chunsheng?"

"Ms Bi? Didn't she go with the others to the county hospital?"

"Get me the exact location, now!"

"Oh... right away!" Luo Cuicui fumbled for his phone and pulled up the hospital's coordinates on a navigation app. "Here. Are you looking for her? Should I arrange for a car?"

"No time." Xuan Ji snatched the phone from him and, with a swift motion, "pulled" the map out into the air.

Luo Cuicui gaped, dumbstruck. He had never seen such an ability before.

Swiftly tracing his greatsword through the air, Xuan Ji drew a talisman from which sparks began to fly.

"Oh my..." Luo Cuicui yelped. In the next instant, he was whisked away by Xuan Ji. Clutching Xuan Ji's arm for dear life, he found himself flying past countless streets while his phone dictated navigation instructions like a tape on fast-forward. As they sped onward inside a fiery sphere, his mind went blank from terror. He had even forgotten to scream.

Before Luo Cuicui could catch his breath, the navigation app sounded. "You have arrived at your destination."

Eyes rolling back, Luo Cuicui fainted.

The field agents at the county hospital had just killed the moustached man. They hadn't even had time to clean up the scene when a fiery ball shot towards them from the sky, alarming everyone into taking defensive positions.

Xuan Ji emerged from the flames with one hand gripping his greatsword and the other holding Luo Cuicui.

"I'm the head of the Disaster Response Department," Xuan Ji said, brushing off sparks as he tossed Luo Cuicui and his own ID to the onsite commander. "Where's Bi Chunsheng?"

"Oh, it's you, Mr Xuan. Don't worry, Ms Bi is fine. She was just... Huh? Where is she?"

At some point, Bi Chunsheng had disappeared.

" 'Don't worry' my ass!" Xuan Ji flicked a coin into the air. The moment it left his hand, it turned into a small wheel of fire and began to roll across the ground, burning a string of Dark Descent inscriptions into the stone.

He only had time to shout, "Arrest Bi Chunsheng!" before

giving chase.

"Arrest *who*?"

Xiao Zheng was silent for about five seconds when he received Luo Cuicui's call before his patience snapped, and fury surged through him. Ever since he'd given the order to "take out the suspect at all costs", the name "Bi Chunsheng" had become a source of torment for him.

Now, a nonsensical call from Luo Cuicui came in, saying Xuan Ji found something suspicious about Bi Chunsheng. The words struck at the very nerve Xiao Zheng had been trying to calm, and he unleashed all of the pent-up pressure in one breath. "Say that again and I'll arrest that acting director of yours first! Are you being serious? He's new here and doesn't know any better, but *you*? How could you say something so irresponsible? Do you even know Bi Chunsheng's background? She's risked her neck for half her career, earned a third-class merit, and only retired from active duty due to injury. Was that temp even born when she joined the field unit?"

"Don't shoot the messenger—I'm just repeating what I was told!" Luo Cuicui was so upset that even his leaves began to wilt. He was wrapped in a small blanket someone had given him, curled up in the boot of a fieldwork vehicle. Sniffling, he continued in a nasal tone, "My director was the one who told me to say this, and I'm just passing it on to you. Mr Xiao, I'll be honest, I can't even tell which way is up anymore. I've been handling disaster relief for years, but I've never seen anything like this... Can the organisation move me somewhere even further

from the action? My heart has been acting up since last year's medical check-up, and I—hello? Mr Xiao? Hello...?"

Xiao Zheng had hung up before he could finish babbling.

By now, it was the middle of the night, but all lights were on in the Anomaly Regulation Bureau's HQ. The field agents had hauled out practically every purification device in the building and were spraying down the bloody writing on the walls. They'd managed to erase half of it, but before they could even catch their breaths, fresh blood began seeping down.

Xiao Zheng tossed his phone aside, braced his hands on the conference table, and bowed his head deeply. For some reason, his mind drifted to the last time he had seen the former chief director.

The previous chief director had been one of the Anomaly Regulation Bureau's founders. After devoting his entire life to the job, he had retired earlier that year at the ripe old age of ninety. Once he left his post, however, it was as though all the life had drained out of him. His once robust body collapsed from illness within days, and a month later, he passed away.

Since he'd only recently stepped down, his departure had still been fresh in everyone's minds when he fell ill. Many of the Bureau's department heads had tried to visit, but none were allowed to see him. In the end, the former director only let Xiao Zheng into his room.

Xiao Zheng could still remember that hospital room. The floor, the walls, and even the ceiling were covered in ancient formations that ordinary people couldn't see. They were packed so densely that when he walked in, he nearly collapsed under the

pressure. It felt as if countless unseen eyes were flipping through the pages of his life, hunting for the tiniest traces of wickedness to drag out for judgment.

Drenched in cold sweat and prickling all over, he watched as the former director struggled to open his eyes and say a few words to him.

The first thing he said was: "Serious trouble will befall the Bureau soon."

The second was: "Huang... I'm the one who requested him. The Bureau needs him, but he's an ordinary man. He'll struggle to find his footing there. That's why I've left you for him. I know you're still clean."

The last words were lodged deep within the old man's throat, so Xiao Zheng had to lean in close to hear. He repeated the same sentence several times. "The DRD's waters run too deep."

Xiao Zheng never got to ask what those words truly meant, just as he never understood why the former director had chosen him. After speaking those final words, the man closed his eyes, never to wake again.

Not long after that, they received an anonymous tip-off accusing the former head of the DRD, Gong Chenggong, of embezzlement and accepting bribes. The full details of his illicit activities were vague, but the methods of payment, the accounts, and the money laundering process were laid out clearly. But before the Bureau could even begin investigating, Gong Chenggong fell into a sudden coma. A host of experts were called in, but to this day, no one had found an explanation for his condition.

Right around then, Xuan Ji had jokingly asked him which position would be the easiest to apply for. Somehow, Xiao Zheng had found himself responding, "The Disaster Response Department."

The DRD's waters run too deep...

"Mr Xiao?"

Xiao Zheng snapped back to his senses. He briefly squeezed his eyes shut before giving a firm command: "Get me the file on Bi Chunsheng from the DRD."

That Xuan Ji might very well have been a walking disaster magnet. Wherever he went, chaos followed. They sent him out to stabilise a situation, and he "stabilised" it so well that he nearly blew up the entire HQ! Why waste such talent on support when he'd be perfect for sabotage work behind enemy lines?

"Bi Chunsheng, born in Yong'an in 1963. After graduating from nursing school, she worked as a nurse at Beicheng Second Hospital. She married in 1985 and had a son in 1987. Prior to this, she did not exhibit any metanatural abilities.

"In 1988, due to the Bureau's negligence, two detained mutant pythons escaped and collided with a moving train. There were over two thousand passengers aboard facing imminent danger. Fortunately, the field supervisor at the time—that is to say, the former chief director—acted quickly, taking control of the situation and safely rescuing everyone on board.

"Our public statement at the time was that the train had derailed. Bi Chunsheng's parents, husband, and son had all been on that train. She was on shift at the hospital when she heard the news. She became emotionally agitated, triggering her meta-

natural ability. It was then detected by our surveillance network.

"After training and political screening, she was recruited into the Security Department in September 1989. Out of gratitude to the ARB for saving her family, she worked diligently over the years, earning one third-class merit and being named 'Outstanding Field Agent' for seven consecutive years. It was only last year that she applied to transfer to the support team due to injury."

"Is that all?" Xiao Zheng asked.

"That's all, sir. That is Bi Chunsheng's record as written."

The more Xiao Zheng listened, the more convinced he became that Xuan Ji was full of it. Bi Chunsheng's story was practically tailor-made for the Bureau's promotional needs: her family was saved by heroes, and, feeling indebted, she was inspired to walk the path of heroism, ultimately becoming one herself. Her journey from familial love to a greater love for society—growing from "serving her family" to "serving the people"—couldn't have been more inspiring.

"Mr Xiao, uh... Our colleagues over at the Chiyuan branch are asking if they should assist Mr Xuan?"

"Assist?" Xiao Zheng snapped, "Assist him with what? You think that idiot deserves assistance?"

"Uh..." *So, was that a yes or a no...?*

"Send an emergency investigation team to Bi Chunsheng's home. I'll apply for a search warrant right now." Xiao Zheng sighed. "If her family has any objections, tell them it's due to special circumstances, and ask for their understanding. This is to be kept strictly confidential, as the reputation of an old hero is involved. No one is allowed to breathe a word of this. And if

Xuan Ji turns out to be wrong, I will personally drag him over and make him apologise to her on his knees."

"Mr Xiao." Another investigator came running and whispered in Xiao Zheng's ear, "We've traced the missing jar of butterfly eggs... May I have a word?" He pulled Xiao Zheng aside and spoke in a low voice. "Sir, something strange is going on. That jar of butterfly eggs was lost thirty years ago. There was a record of it at the time, but for whatever reason, it was erased at some point."

Xiao Zheng was taken aback—thirty years? Wasn't that a bit *too* long ago?

And those butterfly eggs—how could something happen only now, after they'd been missing for thirty years? What could the suspect have been doing with them all this time? Keeping them as decoration? "There was a record of it being lost, you said? What's the story?"

"As you're aware, the Mirage Butterfly is a Class-1 dangerous entity. During an inventory check at the time, the Storage Centre discovered that one of the jars had gone missing. They panicked and reported it immediately. This was back when everything was still recorded on paper, as there was no electronic database yet. But the eggs were never found, and somehow, the record vanished too. All that's left in the file is a note about the record being erased... It was signed by the former head of the DRD, Gong Chenggong, and approved by the former chief director."

A buzzing sound filled Xiao Zheng's head, and his palms turned ice-cold with sweat. He looked up at the walls, where the

bloody writing continued to ooze, and felt as though the entire building were cloaked in a massive shadow. Figures shifted in the pale light as if spectral entities lurked within.

"Don't raise the alarm yet. Just... Let me think."

The county hospital reeked of rotting blood. It was a suffocating stench, reminiscent of the inscriptions on the Demonic Revenant's body—the smell of the summoner.

The coin that Xuan Ji had thrown rolled along, following the scent. After giving Luo Cuicui hasty instructions, Xuan Ji had rushed off after it.

The field agents had all been in awe at his blazing entrance. Instinctively, they followed him, chasing after the coin as it led them to the county hospital's inpatient building. The coin hit the wall and shot upwards like a firecracker, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. Xuan Ji and the agents raised their heads to follow the sparkling trail, their gazes landing on the rooftop—

Atop the five-storey building stood a lone figure.

The glowing coin stopped and hovered about six metres away, illuminating her face like a tiny lantern. The crowd could see that her skin was covered in dark ritualistic markings—as if she had committed an unforgivable sin and was awaiting banishment to the netherworld.

It really was Bi Chunsheng.

"I thought they'd have me take over Gong Chenggong's position, but instead, they brought in an outsider." Bi Chunsheng swept her hair back. Her voice wasn't loud, but even from the rooftop, each word echoed as if it had been whispered right

beside one's ear. "When I first heard the rumours, I knew this outsider must have quite the background. I had hoped to settle this matter before you arrived, but despite all my calculations, I was late by just one day... Perhaps it's fate."

Leaning on his greatsword, Xuan Ji looked up. "Isn't it the losers who blame things on 'fate'? Why are you stealing my lines, Ms Bi?"

Bi Chunsheng's hair fluttered in the murky night wind, her pink cardigan a shocking splash of colour in the darkness. She looked the same as ever, her hair styled in voluminous teddy curls, her face dotted with age spots, the worn scars of time. She was a walking embodiment of the social stereotype for middle-aged women—conjuring images of square dancing, brightly coloured scarves, nagging about marriage, and an inappropriately loud voice.

Yet strangely, as she stood on the rooftop in the cold night winds with her body marked by glyphs, she seemed to break free from those mundane descriptions. Perhaps even seemingly soulless supporting characters like her caught one's notice when they ripped themselves open, revealing that their prop-like shells were also filled with the joys and sorrows of life.

At that moment, Xuan Ji noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Focusing his gaze, he discovered that several of the field agents who had followed him had sprung into action, sending a small team to scale the blind side of the building. They were preparing to ambush Bi Chunsheng from behind.

Xuan Ji's scalp tingled. These idiots! Bi Chunsheng had been in the field for nearly thirty years—how could she not be aware

of such basic tactics?

But by then, the agents had already reached the rooftop, drawing their weapons and aiming them at Bi Chunsheng.

"Don't move!"

"Put your hands where we can see them and stay quiet!"

Xuan Ji shouted, "Get back! Stay away from her!"

Unfortunately, the agents rushing towards their doom couldn't hear him—Bi Chunsheng's metanatural ability as a psychic class metahuman was her voice. Fearing manipulation, the agents had all donned soundproof headphones.

Xuan Ji was dumbfounded.

Damn! Which genius came up with that idea?!

In the next instant, the charging agents froze in place. The rooftop had appeared pitch-black at first glance, but it was actually swarming with densely packed inscriptions. As soon as the agents made their deft landing, they were ensnared by the writhing glyphs, like fat mice trapped in a pit of venomous insects. The temperature around them plummeted to near-freezing. Then, with Bi Chunsheng at the centre, the familiar thick mist began to spread.

Xuan Ji's heart sank.

Sure enough, a man with long hair emerged slowly from the mist, casting curious glances around. The demonic country bumpkin marvelled, "The streets here are wide, the walls towering... Is this the capital? How could there be so few people in the Bureau of Peace?"

Bi Chunsheng turned around, her expression slowly morphing into one of fervour. As though in a trance, she muttered, "It's

real... It's actually real!"

At the sound, Sheng Lingyuan shifted his gaze and studied her with a touch of interest. "Ah... a human candle," he murmured, "No wonder."

Among those present, only Xuan Ji could understand his archaic dialect. "Human candle?"

Sheng Lingyuan cast him a glance but didn't respond. Instead, he turned to Bi Chunsheng, switching to the halting modern speech he'd been picking up on the go. "Was it you who woke me? How did things turn out like this? Who wronged you?"

His tone was naturally soft, and his words—clumsily memorised from TV programmes and his surroundings—were awkward and hesitant. The slight pause between his words added an unexpected sense of deliberation, making the listener feel as though they were being regarded with utmost care. His questions dredged up a lifetime of grievances, and Bi Chunsheng's eyes instantly reddened.

"It's all right." Sheng Lingyuan smiled. "Speak your mind. I'm here. You can talk for as long as you like. No one will interrupt you."

"Bi Chunsheng," Xuan Ji sternly reminded her, "if I were you, I'd be more careful. What you've summoned isn't exactly an angel here to grant your wishes."

"That's none of your concern," Bi Chunsheng retorted, suppressing the fleeting vulnerability on her face with a cold smile. "The contract between us is sealed. I've paid my dues, but he has yet to deliver. Until his debt is settled, he can't touch me. Other-

wise, he will suffer the curse's retaliation a thousandfold."

Sheng Lingyuan stood with his hands behind his back, his expression indifferent, as if he hadn't understood a word she'd said.

Having slipped away from the crowd, Xiao Zheng entered the chief director's office.

Huang Zhiheng had rushed over from home as soon as he'd heard about the incident in Chiyuan. Unlike the former director, who had come from a fieldwork background, an ordinary person like Huang Zhiheng wasn't used to these situations. He could rely on his experience to manage the day-to-day administration. But when chaos broke out, he couldn't even understand what the metahuman field agents were doing. "I was just about to look for you," he said, standing up. "What's the current situation?"

Xiao Zheng closed the door behind him before speaking softly, "I'll explain in a moment, sir. I have a search warrant here—I am requesting your approval to investigate the home of former field agent Bi Chunsheng, who retired to join the support team."

"Bi Chunsheng? Is she one of ours?" Huang Zhiheng was only familiar with a few department heads. Bewildered, he took the document and asked, "Which department? What exactly is going on?"

Xiao Zheng slowly raised his head. "This has something to do with a missing jar of Mirage Butterfly eggs from thirty years ago."

Huang Zhiheng froze on the spot.

"Sir," Xiao Zheng said gravely, "the former director personally filed the report recommending you as his successor. Did you know about this?"

Huang Zhiheng remained silent for a moment before signing the search warrant and pushing it back to Xiao Zheng. He sighed. "I dreaded it when I took this position, hoping to handle everything before it all blew up. I didn't expect it to happen so soon..."

Xiao Zheng asked, "Do you also know why the former director of the DRD, Gong Chenggong, was reported?"

The head of the ARB waved his hand, gesturing for him to sit down as he lit a cigarette. "Ah... where do I even start? You came from fieldwork, didn't you? You must all despise the 'Fifteen-Strike Rule', right?"

"The first principle of field operations for the Security Department is to protect ordinary people," Bi Chunsheng said softly from the rooftop. " 'Agents must not harm any civilians other than suspects. Except in cases of serious misconduct, such as intentional malfeasance or severe procedural violations, any civilian death which occurred during the execution of a mission would result in one point being deducted from each field agent present and two from the commander of the missions, up to a maximum of fifteen strikes.' It's on the first page of the handbook, Mr Xuan. You haven't had time to read it yet, have you? Let me fill you in. If a major issue arises during a mission, or all fifteen points are lost, the DRD must immediately issue an eval-

uation report."

Xuan Ji frowned. He couldn't understand why she was reciting the ARB's rules all of a sudden.

Bi Chunsheng's face twisted into a grim smile. "Thirty years ago, two mutated pythons escaped. The commander in charge of the recovery operation was careless in his pursuit, allowing the mutants to crash into a train as it was crossing a bridge. The mutants wrapped themselves around it and dragged it into the river, where they devoured the life force of the passengers to heal themselves. Out of over two thousand people, fewer than one-tenth survived."

"That's not possible!" shouted one of the field agents whose ear protection had been knocked off. "An incident of that scale hasn't happened since the Bureau was established! A disaster that killed two thousand people? There's no way news of such a catastrophe could have been suppressed!"

"Indeed," Bi Chunsheng said softly. "Tell me then—where did all of those dead people go? Has Mr Xiao found out what happened to that jar of butterfly eggs?"

After receiving Xiao Zheng's instructions, a second wave of agents had rushed to the scene. But before they could even catch their breaths, they were struck with this world-shattering revelation.

For a moment, everyone fell silent, chilled to the bone as the cold fog brushed past them.

The wind picked up as vast storm clouds gathered in the sky. Ominous flashes of lightning flickered restlessly within their dark masses. Off in the distance, intermittent thunder grumbled

out fleeting, hidden curses.

Only Sheng Lingyuan stood with his head bowed. He appeared as indifferent as one of the demons or deities standing among the brushstrokes of a masterwork, unfazed by these surreal events unfolding in the mortal world.

Xuan Ji kept a wary eye on both Bi Chunsheng and the ticking time bomb, the long-haired "dangerous entity" standing behind her. The moment he saw Sheng Lingyuan, he felt as if a sharp thorn had lodged itself in his chest—possibly an aftereffect of the ring's explosion. It made his every breath painful and left him feeling restless. As it turned out, he'd underestimated the dangers of the DRD. Less than twenty-four hours had passed since he'd taken on this cursed support role—not even long enough to break in his badge—yet he was already feeling jaded enough to throw in the towel right then and there.

"Let's be reasonable, Ms Bi." Xuan Ji drew a careful breath, trying to ignore the gaping wound that seemed to have formed in his lungs. "Let's suppose what you're saying is true. That thirty years ago, such a catastrophic event really did occur, and that in order to shirk responsibility, the person in charge covered up the death toll by using Mirage Butterfly eggs. That the butterflies merged with the dead, allowing them to continue living under their original identities. Then, how do you know this? Were you there? If not, who told you? Do you have any evidence?"

As he spoke, Xuan Ji glanced at the demon out of the corner of his eye, only to see that his finely shaped brows had arched. He wore an expression that said, "So that's what it was." Apparently, the legalese pervading Bi Chunsheng's recital of the ARB's

rules had been too much for him to grasp.

What is this... Xuan Ji felt used. *Am I being treated as a "translator's note" now?*

"How do I know?" Bi Chunsheng gave him a look filled with pity. "Mr Xuan, you don't seriously think that this was an isolated case, do you?"

"How does that internet saying go? By the time you spot the first cockroach in your home, you already have tens of thousands of them." Huang Zhiheng's voice dripped down in the tranquil office of the ARB's headquarters like a leaky tap at midnight, each word sending shivers down one's spine.

"If it were their first time, do you think anyone would have the guts to plant those eggs in over a thousand corpses at once? You must have realised by now that this has been a 'routine' for many people over the past thirty years... The 'Fifteen-Strike Rule' was originally created for public safety. It started off with good intentions, but as with everything, it became a double-edged sword. It ties the hands of our field agents, because when those strikes are handed out, the whole team suffers. Among your colleagues who've risked life and limb together, more than one may be approaching the red line. In extreme situations, some agents would rather give up their lives than drag down their teammates by losing points. In recent years, more than half of our field agent casualties have been attributed to this rule. You came from fieldwork, so you know this all too well."

Xiao Zheng was speechless.

Among the field agents, there were detailed "career guides" being passed around. Every new intern would try to learn from the seniors, asking who had the fewest point deductions among their team—and which leaders were more radical, treating their agents like "expendables". Aside from personal ability, how far a field agent could climb came down to how few points they lost. It was even summarised into something of a tenet: in the first two years of work, you couldn't afford to lose any points; if you started out on the wrong foot, your career path would be full of stumbling blocks.

The "Fifteen-Strike Rule" was the thin ice beneath the feet of every frontline field agent. It was the noose around their neck, a tightening headband across their forehead.

"So, when some agents get thrown a hot potato, and the casualties surpass the acceptable limit, they'll turn to Gong Chenggong for 'help'," Huang Zhiheng explained, looking at Xiao Zheng's numb expression. "That is to say... They put those butterfly eggs to use, so that the casualties don't stay 'casualties'. The field agents come out unscathed, the victims' families are grateful, and the DRD sweeps everything under the carpet. Everyone's happy."

Xiao Zheng finally managed to find his voice. "Who were those agents...?"

"I don't know. But the waters have been running deep in all the ARB's departments since its establishment. I haven't managed to find anything conclusive yet, but... you can imagine that most of those old and respected leaders in the Security Department are aware of this. If not for their own benefit, they may

sometimes do it to protect a few promising saplings..." The chief director gave Xiao Zheng a long, deep look, leaving the rest unsaid.

Xiao Zheng didn't react at first, but then a violent shiver ran through his body. It was as though his blood had frozen.

He was a one-in-a-million lightning-fire class metahuman. On top of that, he had the rare "pure lightning" ability.

The modern classification of metanatural abilities was somewhat similar to the traditional five elements theory, where water suppresses fire and so on. Generally speaking, the lightning-fire class would struggle against the water class—except in the case of pure lightning. When Xiao Zheng entered the Bureau, he was treated like a prodigy. During his internship, he was placed directly in the elite forces. It was nothing but smooth sailing after that. Even his luck seemed better than everyone else's. After more than ten years of frontline service, during which he advanced from a junior field agent to the commander of Thunderstrike through countless battles and accolades, he had only ever lost three points—a miracle in its own right.

Was it really just luck? Or had there been someone quietly safeguarding him along the way?

On his deathbed, the former director had said, "I know you're still clean." Was it a praise for following the rules, or a lament from an "insider", directed at the oblivious protectee?

Was he truly... clean?

At that moment, his phone rang—the agents dispatched to investigate Bi Chunsheng's residence had arrived and were asking about the status of the search warrant.

The chief director had him fax the warrant from the office while listening to the investigator's report. "Bi Chunsheng has been living with her parents. Her father passed away recently, but her mother is still in good health. Her husband used to be a middle school teacher but is now retired. He's started up a tutoring business to save up for their son's future property down payment. The couple has one unmarried son who recently graduated and is currently attempting to obtain a faculty position in the same institution... Mr Huang, Mr Xiao, we're at her residence."

Huang Zhiheng interrupted, "Please excuse me, I have a question. If a deceased person has been infected by the Mirage Butterfly and is now essentially a puppet under its control... Is there any way to detect that?"

"It's difficult, I'm afraid. Our equipment can only detect the parasite before the victim suffers complete brain death. It can be caught by identifying discrepancies between brain activity and physical response—but after brain death, the butterfly takes over the nervous system completely, merging with it. In other words, they grow an entirely new nervous system, and our instruments can't detect that. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Well, uh... Unless we open them up and check."

Over time, people's personalities, worldviews, and habits naturally evolved. The phrase "you've changed" was one of the most overused lines in all of literature—a testament to how volatile and unpredictable human hearts could be. Of course, this line was usually the prelude to some wrenching, melodramatic

plot—rather than an invitation to crack open someone's head and look inside. Xiao Zheng's heart thudded when he heard this. He was gripped by an ominous premonition."

As Xuan Ji stared at Bi Chunsheng on the rooftop, he suddenly realised that the thick mist swirling around her wasn't all emanating from the Demonic Revenant. A small portion of it was coming from Bi Chunsheng herself! Her silhouette was nearly lost in the fog, as though she were dissolving into it. The once sallow, yellowish hue of her skin had turned deathly pale, taking on the texture of wax.

What exactly was a "human candle"? Had she truly killed a thousand people? How had she done it? Who were these thousand souls, and why had they perished without a sound?

"Eight years ago, my team was tasked with apprehending a suspect accused of practising dark arts. The suspect was hiding in a densely populated residential area. In order to avoid harming civilians, my partner and I carefully devised a plan to capture him. But something went wrong. Just as the suspect was about to take the bait, one of our junior agents got too nervous and slipped up, alerting the target. The suspect fled into the micro-district's garden. He'd had dozens of lives on his hands and knew that capture meant certain death. Realising there was no escape, he panicked and self-detonated. We didn't have time to clear the area. Eight people died in that garden.

"My partner was in charge that day, and I was second-in-command. Neither of us could avoid the blame. My partner would have double the points taken from him, which would have pushed him right past the red line. My mind went blank at

the time... but my partner told me not to worry. That he had a solution. That was when I learnt. Those *heroes*, the ones with the perfect records and not a single blemish to their name—they had their methods. Infect the body of the dead with a butterfly, and it's as if nothing ever happened... I'll never forget the look on my partner's face when he reassured me. 'This isn't uncommon', he'd said. Do you know how I felt then? I wasn't relieved to have escaped, and I didn't lose sleep over guilt. I... was terrified. If this wasn't uncommon, then how many 'survivors' were no longer human? My whole family were 'survivors'! Were they really themselves, or just a puppet of... of..."

"Ever since that day, I've been consumed by paranoia. It was as if I had gone mad. Every word from my family sent me spiralling. Was this how they used to speak? Is this the tone they'd always had? Had they gradually changed without me noticing? My son came home from school one day and asked for a dish he'd never liked before. Such a tiny thing, and it kept me awake for two whole weeks."

Everyone present was filled with dread. Bi Chunsheng's metanatural ability was her voice. Spoken by her, even the most absurd words were accepted unconditionally. Her short, simple statements plunged everyone around her into a deep well of terror and despair.

Xuan Ji frowned. If Bi Chunsheng's words had such a powerful hypnotic effect on others, then... what about herself? When she became fixated on a thought, could her psychic abilities intensify her own paranoia and delusions?

"Eight years. Eight years spent driven mad by my own

thoughts... I wanted to know the truth, but I was too afraid to find out. When I had the chance to transfer to a support team, I instinctively chose the DRD... Ha, and so what then? Gong Chenggong's influence ran deep in the Bureau. What was I ever going to uncover?

"I grew more and more anxious... Then, just recently, Gong Chenggong was placed under investigation and vanished. My suspicions were finally confirmed. And then... my father passed away."

Blood began to trickle from Bi Chunsheng's sunken eyes. Her skin and flesh warped and sagged, melting like wax. "Eighty-seven years old. He lived a long life before dying of heart failure, departing painlessly. Everyone envied us, said it was a good death, a happy one. And what did I do? I sent them all away like a walking corpse... And then... I couldn't take it anymore. Late one night, I snuck back to his body. Before they cremated him, I... I cracked open my own father's skull, and I saw... I saw..."

The moment her father's skull was opened, all her nightmares became reality.

For thirty years, the family she'd lived with, day in and day out, had truly been nothing more than puppets controlled by butterflies.

"Why did I look? Why did I have to look?!" Bi Chunsheng choked out, her voice rising into a piercing scream, like the cry of a dying beast.

"Shh..." Sheng Lingyuan bent down and gently cradled her warped face, wiping the blood from her eyes. "You pitiful thing," he breathed.

Reverting to his ancient and refined speech, he softly addressed Xuan Ji. "A human candle. That is the medium for Dark Descent. A human candle can commune with the most malevolent and sinister forces of the world. But one must forsake his human body, sever his humanity, abandon all emotions and ties, and relinquish everything, condemning himself to becoming a demon. Do you know what 'everything' means, little yao?"

Xuan Ji was taken aback.

Just then, a field agent ran over and handed him a phone. "Mr Xiao is looking for you."

"We... We just searched Bi Chunsheng's house," Xiao Zheng's strained voice came through the phone. "We... We found three bodies. Her mother, her husband, and her son. Their heads... All of them were open."

Xuan Ji's eyes widened. Through the dense mist, Sheng Lingyuan met his gaze from afar. The eyes of the Demonic Revenant were cold and merciless, yet there was a glimmer of something that almost appeared to be compassion.

For a moment, no one spoke. Only Bi Chunsheng's inhuman wails echoed through the mist, which was growing thicker and thicker. One of the young field agents couldn't stand the noise-induced pounding in his head and retched against the wall.

After a long silence, Xuan Ji said into the phone, "Were all of her relatives really infected by Mirage Butterflies?"

"No."

Xuan Ji could feel an icy stone settling in the pit of his stomach.

"We found traces of Mirage Butterfly infection in her husband's brain, but not in her mother or her son. They were normal. They were..." Xiao Zheng paused for a moment. "They were the true survivors from back then."

"Kill them all," Bi Chunsheng muttered, her features so liquified they no longer looked human. She clung desperately to Sheng Lingyuan's sleeve. "I want them all dead!"

Chapter 6

Strong winds were building on the roof. Strings of inscription shrouded in black mist flew up, wrapping themselves around Sheng Lingyuan like shackles. The storm clouds that had been brewing for so long finally unleashed their wrath. A bolt of lightning pierced through the night sky, striking the hospital building. Faces etched with shock and terror were overexposed in the pale light, appearing like a mural of soul banners on the path to the netherworld.

In mere moments, the flesh on Bi Chunsheng's face had melted away completely, shrivelling until only a loose layer of skin remained, barely clinging to the jagged bones of her skull. She knelt on the ground like a starved, wretched corpse.

Sheng Lingyuan was no longer smiling. Leaning down to stroke her head, he asked, "Who do you want me to kill? The ones who used the Human-Faced Butterflies to trick you? If I killed them all, would it quench your rage?"

Bi Chunsheng's lips could no longer cover her teeth. They clattered together uncontrollably.

Sheng Lingyuan asked again, "What about those who knew the truth but stayed silent? Should they be buried too? Would that satisfy your hatred?"

Ghostly flames flickered in Bi Chunsheng's eyes as her fingers tightened around the hem of his robe.

"Still not enough?" Sheng Lingyuan sighed. A small, brittle curl of hair snapped between his fingers. "What am I to do with you?"

"I want... the truth exposed..." Bi Chunsheng's voice was rough, like grinding bones. "I want them to... answer for their crimes..."

Sheng Lingyuan nodded. "That is only fair."

"No, not enough. I want... I want them to feel my pain... a hundred, a thousandfold..."

"Hmm." Sheng Lingyuan nodded. "That's not too difficult. Anything else?"

With each word Bi Chunsheng spoke, a line of glyphs etched itself into Sheng Lingyuan's body. He listened carefully, with an almost reverent stillness.

Bi Chunsheng struggled to squeeze out her last words. "More... I want... the Crimson Abyss..."

Sheng Lingyuan's expression shifted slightly. He slowly looked up. "Hmm?"

It wasn't unusual for the Demonic Revenant to be confused by an unfamiliar phrase, given his limited grasp of modern language. But this questioning hum flared Xuan Ji's instincts, sending a chill down his spine. Acting instantly, he thrust his greatsword into the ground and propelled himself upward, kicking

off a windowsill on the second floor and landing on the rooftop beside the trapped field agents. The glyphs surged towards him, but Xuan Ji swung his sword at the ground. The flames on the blade forced the symbols back a metre, giving the agents reprieve.

"I want... the flames of the Crimson Abyss to rise again..." Bi Chunsheng murmured, lost in her own world. Suddenly, the inscriptions on the ground turned blood-red, swirling into a cord that drove itself into Sheng Lingyuan's spine. "I..."

Xuan Ji turned and shouted at the agents standing stunned, "What are you waiting for? Retreat!"

The agents reacted instinctively, jumping from the rooftop with their protective gear. Just as their feet left the ground, Bi Chunsheng's body convulsed violently, and a savage wind rose up from beneath Sheng Lingyuan's feet, surging in all directions.

Xuan Ji rushed forward and reached out, but only managed to grab Sheng Lingyuan's sleeve... He'd moved without even knowing why.

The sleeve tore, and Xuan Ji was swept away by the gale. He slammed his greatsword into the concrete of the rooftop and gripped the hilt with all his strength, becoming a fluttering flag in the windstorm.

Sheng Lingyuan had been gently caressing Bi Chunsheng's head. But without warning, he clenched his fingers and drove them into her skull.

One of Bi Chunsheng's eyes popped out of its socket from the pressure, blood gushing from her head in a fountain. Her face went blank with shock.

Sheng Lingyuan straightened up and lowered his gaze, looking down at the woman sprawled on the ground. "No."

The Dark Descent's bloody inscription had taken form. But the principal of the ritual—the Demonic Revenant—had brazenly torn apart the "contract" written in the spell. He'd even delivered a fatal wound to his summoner in defiance—perhaps a first in all of history. For a fleeting moment, even the inscription itself seemed to freeze.

But then the glyphs roared to life, rising from his body and transforming into sharp blades. They slashed in retaliation, quickly reducing the Demonic Revenant's once impenetrable body to a bloody mess. Despite the mutilation, the smile on his face never waned.

"Wait!" Xuan Ji shouted instinctively. "No..."

A gust of wind, sharp as a blade, sliced through his words. The nauseating stench of blood permeated the fog on the rooftop. In the midst of it all, the grisly crunch of fingers sinking into bone was disturbingly clear.

"All my life, *zhen* loathed to become fettered."

Wild winds whipped Sheng Lingyuan's hair while the inscriptions on his body ran amok, seeming intent on flaying him alive. First, they split his skin, then peeled away his flesh layer by layer, revealing the veins and bones beneath... But it was as if he couldn't feel any of it. His skeletal hand was still firmly embedded in Bi Chunsheng's skull, sinking deeper inch by inch.

A bloody mist sprayed across Xuan Ji and his sword, leaving neither man nor blade untouched.

The Demonic Revenant tilted his head slightly towards Xuan

Ji. His once handsome face was now a disfigured ruin, with only patches of flesh clinging to exposed bone. Yet Xuan Ji could sense that he was still smiling. His exposed collarbone snagged on torn cloth, but his posture remained effortlessly straight, almost graceful.

Shredded by thousands of curse-blades, the Demonic Revenant was a sight out of nightmares. This should have been a moment of triumph, but Xuan Ji found himself squeezing his eyes shut, unable to watch.

The Demonic Revenant enunciated each word: "Yet, you fools dared touch my inverted scale."

Bi Chunsheng's expression twisted with terror. She barely managed to choke out a few words. "Aren't you afraid... of being reduced... to ashes?"

"Heh."

Her voice grew thinner, until it was barely a wisp. "Aren't you afraid... of your soul... being destroyed?"

Sheng Lingyuan laughed, sending shivers down Xuan Ji's spine. As the fiery totem on his brow flared, he heard the Demonic Revenant murmur: "Such would only be a blessing."

Before his voice could fade, the rooftop exploded with a deafening boom, sending half the building into the air. Xuan Ji and his sword were flung into the chaos as the Demonic Revenant's laughter echoed despite his crumbling bones. At that moment, Xuan Ji thought he heard the death cries of a thousand souls assault his ears. His mind went blank, but his body rolled off the collapsing roof out of instinct, snatching up a straggling field agent and hurling him to safety.

In the next instant, lightning began raining down. A fraction of a second too slow, Xuan Ji was swallowed up by the electrical storm.

The entire Chiyuan region, spanning three cities and seventeen districts, was plunged into a massive blackout.

Eighty-one bolts of lightning simultaneously struck the same point. Every plant in the area caught fire, thick smoke and flames spreading rapidly. The sounds of people, cars, and everything else were drowned out by the wrath of divine punishment. It was as if the world itself had been turned upside down. Be they metahumans or ordinary people—all were like ants swept away in a flood, struggling desperately to escape.

After what felt like an eternity, the thunder's rage finally subsided. But before anyone could recover their overloaded senses, the sky split open, releasing a torrential downpour.

The fires were extinguished.

On the rooftop, the crazed woman and the even more insane demon she'd summoned had both turned to ash without leaving behind a single trace. The hospital building was now little more than a pile of rubble. Apart from Xuan Ji, there were no signs of life.

Xuan Ji had fallen to his knees, enveloped by a massive pair of fiery wings that had unfurled from his back. When the storm passed, the wings flickered briefly before fading into glowing embers and disappearing once more.

His bloodstained greatsword crashed into the ruins. His vision went black, and he fell head first onto the ground below.

By the time Xuan Ji woke up, he was already in the hospital.

Grimacing, he struggled to sit up. His entire body felt off-kilter, as if his bones had been taken apart and reassembled—with his neck screwed on at the wrong angle. He pulled the IV needle out of his hand and tried to straighten his neck as he recalled what had happened earlier. All the while, he had the nagging feeling that something was missing.

But what? His wallet? No, his wallet was practically decorative. It couldn't have left such a noticeable feeling of absence. Was it his phone then?

Right. His phone had gone RIP at the hospital, courtesy of the Demonic Revenant's artificial winter. Hopefully, the Bureau would reimburse him for it.

Being phoneless was certainly inconvenient, but... this strange feeling didn't seem like something a missing phone could cause.

Xuan Ji fidgeted uncomfortably. It was as if his entire body had become a few kilos lighter when he woke up. He felt weightless and ungrounded.

The door swung open. Xiao Zheng entered the ward, carrying a large cloth bundle about a metre long.

Xuan Ji's neck cracked loudly. He'd snapped it back into place with so much force that the entire thing had gone numb. "Yeowch!"

Xiao Zheng tossed the bundle he was carrying onto the bed, which creaked and nearly collapsed under the weight.

Xuan Ji quickly rolled aside. "Whew—Hey! No respect for your elders... What the hell is that?"

"Your stuff."

Xuan Ji unwrapped the bundle and was greeted by the sight of his greatsword. Its blade was still stained with blood that nobody had bothered to wipe away. He froze for a moment and rolled his neck. Suddenly, he realised why he had that odd, floaty sensation—his spine was empty!

This sword was his lifebound weapon and usually stayed in his spine, emerging only when summoned. After slaying enemies, it would always return to its "sheath" within his body. The sword had a peculiar temperament, as if it refused to be seen by the unworthy. So... why hadn't it returned to his back this time?

"Regulations state that any anomalous objects discovered are to be reported to the Bureau. We could let it slide if it were something smaller, but... this thing is way too conspicuous." Xiao Zheng pulled a chair over and collapsed into it. He had been working all night at HQ before flying straight over at dawn. He rubbed his face in exhaustion. "Then again, with how chaotic everything was yesterday, I doubt anyone noticed."

Xuan Ji wrapped the sword back up and asked, "How's the situation?"

"The Dark Descent glyphs have all disappeared. We couldn't find Bi Chunsheng's remains."

"Any casualties?"

"Six field agents were severely injured at the Crimson Canyon. The rest only had minor injuries. No deaths, fortunately."

"I saw a kid next to the building when it collapsed and threw him out of the way. Is he all right?"

"He's fine. He thought you sacrificed yourself to save him and

had a complete breakdown, so we had to sedate him. He's lying in the room next door."

"That's no good..." Xuan Ji made a pained face. "I'd better keep my distance when he wakes up. What if he falls for my dashing looks and proposes marriage?"

Xiao Zheng gave Xuan Ji a deadpan stare, not even bothering to dignify his inappropriately-timed joke with an eye-roll. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and fumbled with it for a moment, only to remember that smoking wasn't allowed in hospitals. Reluctantly, he put it away.

Sensing the shift in mood, Xuan Ji stopped joking around. After tossing out a coin that inscribed an "EXPEL" on the door, he reached over and opened the bedside window. "No one's coming in. Go ahead and smoke... Are you all right?"

Xiao Zheng tossed the cigarette pack to Xuan Ji. With zero regard for hospital etiquette, the two of them filled the room with clouds of smoke. A melancholic mood pervaded the ward.

"The guy we shot—Ji Qingchen, the man with the moustache—was just an ordinary person," Xiao Zheng said. "He exhibited some anomalous traits because he was infected by the Mirage Butterfly. That's why the mithril bullet was able to hit him. Even though the butterfly had fully taken over his body, he was still alive yesterday. That bullet became his cause of death."

Xuan Ji wanted to speak, but nothing left his mouth. A civilian died due to misjudgement. This could easily be considered a serious dereliction of duty.

"I lost two points... no big deal. Even after that, I still have eleven. I'm not going out on field missions anymore, and it's

unlikely I'll get many chances to command operations. It's more than enough." Xiao Zheng waved a weary hand. "The irony is, despite getting everything wrong yesterday, the order to 'sacrifice' Bi Chunsheng and ensure Ji Qingchen was killed before eleven turned out to be, by some stroke of luck, the right call to 'minimise losses'. The fact that I forced myself to give that merciless order even ended up being the reason I was exempt from guilt... But now that this whole butterfly fiasco has come to light, everything else seems minor in comparison. I'm just being retained for investigation."

Xiao Zheng had a deep frown on his brow. Fighting back some sort of emotion, he took two heavy drags from his cigarette, the hot tobacco hissing. He exhaled a chaotic plume before continuing, "If a civilian witnesses an anomalous event, we have to erase their memory. We normally use special equipment or drugs, but that always comes with some degree of harm. When Bi Chunsheng used to work in the field, the DRD never needed to deal with civilians rescued during operations. She always altered their memories personally. Her psychic abilities were much gentler than the equipment, though using them took more time and effort... She probably didn't mind though. I don't think she had any obligation to do it, but it seemed to be what she liked doing most."

It had been her calling. The meaning behind everything she once stood for.

Xuan Ji sat cross-legged on the hospital bed, cigarette in mouth, listening silently. He removed the plastic wrapper from the bouquet of flowers by his bedside and folded it into a make-

shift ashtray, tossing it between them.

"Those people she saved... After their memories were altered, they continued to stay in touch with her. Bi Chunsheng kept a special contact list with their information. That list... it..." Xiao Zheng tried several times but couldn't get the rest of the words out.

Xuan Ji flicked the ash off his cigarette and interjected, "The people on that list had all been turned into zombies by Mirage Butterflies, right?"

Xiao Zheng was taken aback by Xuan Ji's apathetic tone, his brooding mood abruptly dispelled.

"It wasn't hard to guess." Xuan Ji shrugged. "So, she spread the butterfly eggs?"

"She would send out food laced with the eggs as gifts, then follow up with voice messages saying that the gifts had a short shelf life and should be eaten as soon as possible. The messages would be imbued with her ability. Those people had already had their memories altered once and were highly susceptible to suggestion. Not to mention, they all trusted her. Even those who didn't like that kind of food would still try it after hearing the message. Once they were fully infected and lost control of their bodies, she would call them and reveal the truth."

As their illusions shattered, the victims would realise that they were about to be killed for absolutely no reason—by the very person they trusted most. Their resentment would be immense, becoming fuel for the Dark Descent.

Xuan Ji thought of Bi Chunsheng's blank, melting face. "Her abilities worked on the Mirage Butterflies too?"

"Yes. Humans have their own instincts and emotions. A defensive or hostile mindset would influence how strongly psychic abilities affect them. But the Mirage Butterfly doesn't 'think', it doesn't feel—it just manipulates its host's body based on external stimuli. That makes it more susceptible to psychic suggestion than a human. The Historical Restoration Department has even proposed that the Mirage Butterfly may have originally been a tool used by psychic class metahumans for malicious purposes."

Xuan Ji sighed. "No wonder she was able to make that boy write with the Dark Descent glyphs."

Xiao Zheng paused for a moment before continuing. "When we found her family's bodies, they were lying in their beds, already decomposed, except for her husband. The walls and floor were covered in blood inscriptions that masked the corpses' stench, keeping the neighbours from noticing. Her husband had been infected, so his body didn't decay... Bi Chunsheng must have been agitated when she split his head open. His sweater was torn."

Cigarette still between his lips, Xuan Ji mumbled, "Was the sweater seaweed-green?"

"What?" Xiao Zheng hadn't heard him.

Xuan Ji shook his head, appearing somewhat despondent.

"Her son and mother were in their own rooms, their bodies covered by blankets, while her husband's body was in the master bedroom. There were signs that someone had lain beside him. That could have been the moment that she went mad... or perhaps it had already begun eight years ago."

For eight years, she had lived in a constant nightmare, always

questioning whether her loved ones were real or merely the walking dead. Then she found the parasitic Mirage Butterfly in her father's corpse. Her nightmare had become reality, and from then on, truth and delusion began to blur. Her own colleagues, with whom she had gone through thick and thin, had turned out to be the masterminds. Then what about the things she'd once vowed to fight for? Had they all been a sham?

How must she have felt when, in her madness, she cut open the heads of her family, only to find that neither her mother nor her son had been infected?

How many layers were there to this infernal torment? How far must one fall for their cries to reach the demons wandering below?

Neither spoke until their cigarettes had burned down to the filters. Then Xuan Ji remembered something and asked, "That kid who was infected... Is he still alive?"

"Yes. The cryosurgery was successful, and he should be recovering soon. We've extracted and isolated the butterfly," Xiao Zheng replied. "But this can't be kept under wraps anymore. It's the biggest scandal since the ARB's inception... Maybe this had even been Bi Chunsheng's goal to begin with. Mr Huang was called in by his superiors and hasn't returned yet."

"That boy and the final sacrifice—were they also people Bi Chunsheng saved at some point?"

"No." Xiao Zheng shook his head. "Neither of them had any prior connection to Bi Chunsheng or the ARB. They didn't know each other either. Their only commonality is that they're both from Dongchuan—but Bi Chunsheng had never been

there. That's what makes this so strange. The investigation team is currently digging into their social connections. As for where the Mirage Butterflies came from, or how Bi Chunsheng knew about the Dark Descent ritual... none of that is clear yet."

Xuan Ji stubbed out his cigarette and raised his eyes. "I thought Bi Chunsheng chose the DRD because of the nature of her abilities, but that's not it, is it?"

Xiao Zheng flinched.

"That wasn't hard to guess either." Lines creased the lids of his cold eyes. Out of boredom, he picked up the stray bits of ash and sprinkled them into the makeshift ashtray. His actions were slow, his words even slower. "The one who conspired to manipulate death rates using the Mirage Butterfly must have been my predecessor in the DRD, right?"

Xiao Zheng stayed silent. A tacit confirmation.

"You knew something was going on in the DRD, but you couldn't get involved directly. So you brought in an outsider as a decoy to stir things up. Nothing bothers me more than trouble and hard work. If I'd known this was going to be a low-pay, high-risk job full of landmines, I'd have run back home drowning in debt. But you didn't mention a word of it. You figured you'd just con me into showing up and worry about the consequences later. Xiao Zheng, you know I'm but a poor drifter in the capital with barely a friend to my name. Nobody to rely on after all these years. And you pull *this* on me? You don't even feel an ounce of guilt after screwing me over, do you? 'Cause ouch, that hurts."

Tongue-tied, Xiao Zheng met Xuan Ji's gaze.

Xuan Ji's eyes gleamed with his usual laughter. But on closer inspection, that smile appeared a heavy burden clinging to a tired face. His young, bright eyes carried a peculiar weariness, as though they were weighed down by that smile. In that instant, Xiao Zheng realised Xuan Ji was just like his smile—outwardly sincere, yet completely hollow. He had friends everywhere, but he never opened his heart to any of them.

Xuan Ji was usually easy-going, his edges and temper smoothed out by years of corporate life. He appeared to lack any rigid principles. It wasn't until that sense of detachment came out to prick Xiao Zheng directly that he noticed the boundary Xuan Ji had put up between himself and the rest of the world.

"I... There's no one else I can trust anymore," Xiao Zheng muttered. "I even suspect that the Mirage Butterfly's shadow looms over *my* record."

Xuan Ji chuckled. *Was there even room for doubt?*

If a select few breezed through life when everyone else was struggling, then there was almost certainly something fishy going on.

Xiao Zheng had been "born under a lucky star" in every sense of that phrase. Not only was his family wealthy—it was harmonious, free from the usual messy feuds of the elite. That, coupled with him being an only child, meant that he'd been doted on from a young age. When his metanatural abilities came to light, his family hadn't disowned him as a freak—they even took pride in him. At eighteen, Xiao Zheng officially joined the ARB, balancing his undergraduate studies with training in the Security Department. Immediately after graduating, he entered Thunder-

strike, one of the three elite forces. His career advanced by leaps and bounds, and now, he had become one of the core members of the organisation overseeing all metahumans...

Only to have his worldview come crumbling down.

"Come on, Mr Golden Child," Xuan Ji chided, "you can't throw yourself into this kind of world expecting to come out unscathed. You've been able to avoid it until now, but it's about time you got your own battle scar or two. At your level, a review is nothing more than a slap on the wrist. You'll be fine. As for the whole butterfly thing—you were oblivious to it before, so don't dwell on it now. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise. Don't let yourself get weighed down so much by a Schrödinger's cat situation. Take Bi Chunsheng as a cautionary tale."

Just like history, a person's fate was a level 2 chaotic system. Cause and effect were intertwined. For example, had Bi Chunsheng not succumbed to paranoia, she wouldn't have been driven half-mad by her own psychic abilities. And, of course, she wouldn't have desecrated her father's body by cracking open his skull. She would have retired with honours as a hero and gone square dancing or travelling, returning to the Bureau during holidays to give lectures to young recruits. Her husband may have been a phantom of the person he was thirty years ago, but at least her mother and son would still be alive.

Life was no more than an illusion. Human or butterfly, which among them could claim to be any more real than the other?

Xiao Zheng found little comfort in the lukewarm consolation. His voice was thick in his throat as he said, "I don't under-

stand. Why does something as harsh as the 'Fifteen-Strike Rule' exist to begin with?"

Why did metahumans have to hide in the shadows of society? Why did protecting ordinary people always have to be their first priority?

When danger arose, why was it the metahumans who were sacrificed and discarded?

Were metahumans somehow inferior? Were their lives worth less, meant to be taken for granted?

Xuan Ji's eyes wandered over to his bare right index finger. A pale band of skin was the only evidence that a ring had ever been there. Without interrupting Xiao Zheng's catharsis, he skilfully reshaped the plastic ashtray. He wrapped the ashes and cigarette butts in the centre, turning the outer flaps into the petals of a lopsided flower. He casually pinned it to Xiao Zheng's blazer before saying, "Xishan is a nature reserve."

Xiao Zheng was confused. "What...?"

"Twenty miles to the south, right next to the Bureau, you'll find the Xishan Wildlife Conservation Centre. It's fenced off, and as long as the wild animals stay obediently 'protected' inside, they'll be well-fed and seen as 'our furry friends'. But the moment they break free and start running wild... well, sorry, 'friend'. Best case, they're restrained; worst case, they're shot." Xuan Ji got down from the hospital bed and shook the stiffness out of his legs. He bent down to pick up his greatsword and stumbled towards the door. "The ARB is like that reserve. The 'Fifteen-Strike Rule' is the fence that no metahuman is allowed to break. You're not a child anymore, my dear Zheng. How do

you still not understand this? As for me, I'm just a wolf disguised as a stray dog, trying to scrounge for leftovers around here. I have no interest in getting involved with these affairs."

Thinking Xuan Ji was about to resign on the spot, Xiao Zheng bolted upright. "Wait, where are you going?"

"Shhh—calm down. I'm not planning on quitting just yet. That demon that was summoned might've had something to do with my family. I'm going back to my hometown to dig up some info, so I'll be taking a week off, Mr Xiao." Just as he opened the door, Xuan Ji suddenly thought of something and turned back. "Remember to reimburse me for my phone. And top it off with a little extra for scamming me, yeah?"

After the thunderstorm, the Crimson Canyon was saturated with the pungent smell of ozone. When the Dark Descent dissipated, the mutated trees that had stirred up so much chaos in the canyon began to wither. Their vitality overdrawn, they turned into coils of dried leaves and drifted away with the flowing streams. But the ARB had remained on alert and dispatched several field teams to patrol the canyon. That was the scene Xuan Ji observed as he flew overhead.

The wings that had shielded Xuan Ji from the thunderbolts were fully extended from his back, spanning almost eight metres. When folded, they were about the height of a person. Though enormous, they didn't appear heavy, for each feather was made up of condensed flames. As he glided through the sky, they heated the surrounding air to a scorching intensity, warping the light and giving him a surreal impression of weightless-

ness, like a fiery cloud drifting through a mirage.

Regardless, planes weren't allowed to fly over the Crimson Canyon. Even the Bureau's business jet had to land a hundred kilometres to the north. He had no fear of being seen.

Xuan Ji often claimed to be a free spirit, a metahuman "born in the wild"—but that was a lie. Even the most marginal of metahumans were still humans. Xuan Ji wasn't a human at all.

He couldn't quite define what he was. That was why he hadn't protested when the Demonic Revenant called him "little yao". He had never been a child, nor would he ever age. He had been born with his current face—one that would seemingly never change. Looking through the *Compendium* in his eye, he could see the taxonomic classification of every other being. But when he looked into a mirror, the *Compendium*'s white, mist-formed page showed only a single, solitary line: Keeper of the Austral Flames.

As for what manner of creature a "Keeper of the Austral Flames" was—human or yao, foreign or domestic—the *Compendium* offered no insight.

He had first emerged into the wider world ten years ago. As he gazed at a winding mountain road without a clue to where he was, he heard an ominous crash. Following the sound, he came upon the scene of a car accident. The vehicle had blown a tyre, and the driver lost control, sending it tumbling off the road. Xuan Ji arrived just in time to pull the occupants out of the wreckage before it exploded.

Xuan Ji managed to save the driver in time. But his teenaged son had been sitting in the back without a seatbelt. He'd died

instantly.

Xuan Ji had been a stranger to this world. Surrounded by a wilderness of trees and mountains, he had no idea how to seek help. What crossed his mind was a secret technique called "Corpse Recollection". Within two minutes of the deceased's final breath, Xuan Ji had the ability to place one of his feathers into the corpse's ear. The feather would transform into a spark and burrow into the brain, allowing Xuan Ji to listen to fragments of the deceased's memories. However, the content and clarity would depend on what that person had been thinking in their final moments of life.

In their last moments, most accident victims would be overwhelmed by terror and instinctively call for help. Xuan Ji thought that perhaps the teen's final thoughts contained a clue about how to seek that help. Unfortunately, he had died too abruptly—likely from impact as the car flipped over. His mind had barely registered what was happening. In those final moments, his thoughts had been occupied by inconsequential, everyday trifles.

While trying his confused best to keep the unconscious father alive, Xuan Ji listened to the memories he could only half understand—the wistful fragments of a mundane life that had ended too early.

The young man had just been accepted into university and had been on his way to enrol when the accident occurred. Home, school, dreams of the future, and the ache of being separated from the girl he'd had a secret crush on—these vibrant flashes of youth flooded Xuan Ji's ears, only to scatter like smoke

in the wind as the body cooled.

At that moment, the father briefly opened his eyes. Delirious from blood loss, he mistook Xuan Ji for his son and gripped his hand tightly. "Don't be scared"—he repeated those same three words over and over as he rubbed Xuan Ji's hand, smearing it with his blood.

Warm and sticky like a spider's web, it ensnared the newly-born Xuan Ji in this secular, mundane world.

Following the father's incoherent instructions, Xuan Ji fumbled for the pair's phones. He pressed buttons randomly until, by some stroke of luck, he'd managed to call the authorities through sheer guesswork.

After that, he buried the young man's body and, using a minor illusion, assumed his identity. He hadn't needed to transform himself completely—just adopt the teen's attire and mannerisms, then cloud the perception of others so that they would think the young man had always looked that way.

"Xuan" had been the son's original surname. He felt drawn to it from the moment he'd heard it, so he decided to keep it. "Ji", on the other hand, was the name he had chosen for himself and legalised once he'd figured out the modern household registration system. Since he was over eighteen on paper, the process had been tedious—but necessary. After all, Ji was his true name. He had no idea who'd given it to him, but it was the name he had been born with. The ancients believed that a name was linked to one's fate; even modern psychology agreed that names were connected to the subconscious. He felt that it was the name he ought to bear.

Graduation from secondary school marked a turning point in life, especially for those moving away for university. After just one semester, teenagers would often return with different personalities and habits—so no one paid much attention to how he had "changed". Thus, "Xuan Ji" gained an identity, becoming a human with a backstory. Even the investigators from the ARB could find no flaws in his records.

Xuan Ji soared above the Crimson Canyon, heading straight towards its forbidden heart, where even the ARB dared not venture. He plunged into the depths of the dense forest, and as he descended, his wings dislodged some of the foliage. A few vibrant leaves fluttered lazily downward, but before they could touch the ground, a black flame erupted, instantly reducing them to ash.

The silence here was eerie. Through the *Compendium*, Xuan Ji could see layers of ancient formations. They were carved into the ground, suspended in the air, and even woven into the webs between trees—each one brimming with lethal intent.

Xuan Ji descended through the towering canopy, landing gracefully. He folded his wings and slipped into a shirt, fastening its mother-of-pearl buttons as he strolled effortlessly through the treacherous maze. Each step he took fell perfectly within the gaps between formations, as if he knew the path by heart.

Following a small, intermittent stream, he arrived at the foot of a mountain deep within the Crimson Canyon. As he mouthed a few words, a flame rose from his palm and vanished into the earth. The ground rumbled, and from the depths of the

canyon came a long sigh. As if a barrier had been lifted, the once silent forest erupted with sound. Whispers of birds and insects filled the air, and snake-like vines lowered themselves, brushing against Xuan Ji affectionately. The ancient trees shifted, slowly rearranging themselves to reveal a hidden path.

As he stepped through the passage, the vista opened up to reveal a vast canyon over three hundred metres wide. Flanked by steep cliffs, it was lush with vegetation and coursing streams. At its heart lay an enormous ancient city.

This was the Crimson Abyss, the place the living must not set foot, lest they perish.

This was where he had been born.

The ancient city in the canyon was like Pompeii buried under volcanic ash or Atlantis beneath the sea—completely desolate and pervaded by a deathly stillness. At the centre stood a colossal, black stone tree towering over a hundred metres high. Its leaves and branches were so lifelike that one could easily picture them rustling in the wind. To the south of the stone tree, on the highest point in the Abyss, stood a grand hall facing north, flanked by two temples. Each bore a massive flame-shaped symbol identical to the totem on Xuan Ji's forehead.

The hall and temples made up the centrepiece of the Abyss, surrounded by courtyard houses big and small. The bridges and carved railings between them still stood, the murals on the weathered stone tablets remaining faintly visible.

It was a city frozen in time.

But the moment Xuan Ji set foot inside, the dead city suddenly came to "life". Thick layers of black mist began to seep

from the ground, the cliffs, the cracks in the stone, and the forest—rising into the air and morphing into all manner of figures. Some took human form. Others were mere skeletons. Others still were part man, part beast. There were even those whose forms were so indistinct that they seemed little more than a collection of random body parts, all twirling around him in glee.

Suddenly, the piercing whinny of horses rang out. From within the mist, a cavalry troop charged forth, galloping through the sky. They came to a halt in front of Xuan Ji, the steeds' iron hooves raised high. One by one, the ghostly riders dismounted, materialising into solid forms and kneeling before him in reverence.

Xuan Ji waved a hand to dismiss them. "Times have changed in the outside world. There's no need for all this ceremony every time. You lot always make me feel like some relic from a feudal era."

The head of the cavalry stepped forward and peeled back the black mask on his face, revealing a visage that could frighten a man to death. He had only one eye, and patches of bone protruded through the left side of his jaw. Decayed flesh clung to his face, melding his ruined features together. He grinned at Xuan Ji with this terrifying countenance as a raspy, indistinct voice rose from his throat. "Patriarch has... returned... home..... Is all... well... outside?"

"Ah, it's been a while since I've been back. Thank you for looking after things, Sabre One. There's been a lunatic nearby recently, digging up graves to summon demons. That hasn't caused any problems here, has it?"

"No..." replied Sabre One. "We were just... about... to send... a dream... message..."

"What about?"

"Axe Seven and... Sword Twelve... wish to... have their souls... return to the heavens." Sabre One's ghoulish face took on a complex expression. One of longing mixed with melancholy.

Two knights stepped forward, removed their armour, and fell to one knee before Xuan Ji.

One of them was already headless, with nothing but a wisp of mist where a neck should have been. The other was charred black, with occasional flashes of red appearing across his body. Upon closer inspection, those "red patches" were in fact sparks. He was just like a piece of hot coal, a slight breeze away from catching fire anew.

Xuan Ji sighed. The *Compendium*, still open in his eye, identified these knights as "Armament Spirits".

It was said that the Crimson Abyss had once been an ancient battlefield where countless cold weapons had been left behind. Among them were special pieces, referred to in ancient texts as Divine Armaments—though Xuan Ji believed they should have been called "Ghost Armaments" instead. They were a grim symbol of how a bygone society had oppressed its people, for these weapons were "forged" using living beings.

Through secret techniques that forcibly melted their living bodies in furnaces, Armament Spirits were forged into weapons—and bound to them. These spirits were forever imprisoned within their weapon bodies, doomed to eternal servitude.

Weapon smithing technology had been limited in ancient

times, so even the most "divine" of weapons would eventually chip and rust. If the weapon deteriorated, so too would the spirit within. Some would rot away along with the weapons, while others lost their minds before their vessels even crumbled... Only when the weapon was completely destroyed could the residing spirit find rest.

Xuan Ji had no idea how powerful the so-called Divine Armaments once were, but he knew the suffering of these spirits all too well. Long forgotten on the ancient battlefield, these Armament Spirits had long since lost their masters. They were now his neighbours, his subjects, and his friends. From the moment Xuan Ji was born, they had been his only companions. He had never understood why, but all Armament Spirits—even those that had lost their minds—instinctively submitted to him. They grew calm in his presence, if only for a while.

The Armament Spirits called him the Patriarch and willingly obeyed his commands. And when their pain became too great to bear, they would come to Xuan Ji. They would ask him to destroy their weapon bodies and grant them release.

"All right," Xuan Ji said softly. "Then... Let's head to the altar."

The altar lay behind the southern hall, encircled by thirty-five steles. Engraved on each stele were dates of birth and death. According to Sabre One, they belonged to Xuan Ji's thirty-five predecessors, akin to ancestors in a family lineage. Each of them had once been the Keeper of the Austral Flames.

Every new Keeper was born after the death of the previous. Xuan Ji himself had "emerged" in this very forest of steles, but his early memories were a vague blur. He faintly recalled

being immobile, without need of food or drink. From Sabre One's descriptions, he suspected that he must have been like a slow-growing potato sprouting from the remains of his predecessor.

The Armament Spirits had kept the altar immaculate. At its centre lay the "bodies" of the two weapons seeking liberation: a broken axe, and an old sword, so corroded by rust that it was almost too pitiful to behold.

Well accustomed to this ritual, the spirits approached to offer Axe Seven and Sword Twelve their farewells.

Most of these broken spirits had long lost the ability to speak, so they simply gathered in silence, imparting a final sendoff before surrounding the altar. Axe Seven and Sword Twelve knelt before Xuan Ji one final time. Then their spectral forms plunged into the broken axe and rusty sword.

Xuan Ji accepted a white cloth from Sabre One and knelt to wipe the dust from the broken weapons with the meticulousness of a craftsman. As if by some cosmic coincidence, the wind chose that moment to whisk away a cloud, allowing sunlight to pour down onto the altar. The cloth brushed away a patch of rust on the sword, revealing a corner of the engraving. The characters were unclear, save for a single "grass" radical.

There were too many characters containing that radical to guess what the sword's name might have been, but it certainly wasn't the legendary "Mo Ye"—the spirits here were all nameless blades, unremarkable and insignificant. Forgotten by the world, it seemed as though they existed solely to endure this fate.

Once he finished cleaning the "remains", Xuan Ji asked, "Do

you have any regrets?"

The spirits within the broken weapons responded with silence.

Per tradition, Xuan Ji repeated the question two more times and waited for a moment, but the two spirits did not reappear. That was their answer.

"As thank you for your company over the years, allow me to see you off," Xuan Ji said softly, pressing a hand to his chest. "Farewell, my brothers."

As he spoke, he curled his fingertips over his chest and pulled out a ball of fire. Xuan Ji cradled the flames in his hands as the two broken weapons on the altar lifted themselves into the air. They circled him a few times with a hint of reluctance. Then, they dove into the fire.

Xuan Ji closed his eyes.

The moment the weapons touched the fireball, it flared up, swiftly devouring their bodies. The flames turned a pure, blinding white, so intense they could melt gold and crack jade. In the blink of an eye, the two weapons had dissolved in Xuan Ji's palms.

Two indistinct figures rose from the flames and hovered in the air, one tall, one short. They no longer bore their prior ghostly forms. The taller one was a slender scholar. He wore patched clothes, but his beard was neatly trimmed—an image of dignity amidst poverty. The shorter figure, delicate and petite, bore the ornaments and form of a young girl. It was a stark contrast to their mutilated appearances as Armament Spirits. This was how they had looked before they were forged into weap-

ons—when they were still alive.

Through the flames, Xuan Ji glimpsed fragments of their lives from before they had become spirits. But like the chaotic whisperings of Corpse Recollection, these scenes were disjointed and fleeting. Before he could piece together a full memory, the images vanished together with the figures into the fire.

For a long time, the other spirits stood in silence, their gazes fixed on the altar's flames as they dimmed and eventually went out in Xuan Ji's palm. Then, like drifting souls, they dispersed.

At moments like these, Xuan Ji often found it difficult to understand what the spirits were thinking. Initially, he had feared that witnessing the farewell rites would prompt them to queue up, asking for their own release. After all, death had a way of calling to others. But he soon realised that his worries were unfounded. Though the spirits couldn't grasp the joys or passions of life, for some reason, they still chose to persist. It was only when they had truly reached the end of all mountains and water, exhausted by their very existence, that they would carefully choose their final resting place and bid farewell to the mortal world with due solemnity.

Xuan Ji sat alone on the altar, the thick, polished veneer he usually wore momentarily stripped away. The sunlight painted his expression with a touch of loneliness, and as he listened to the chirping of insects from the forest of steles, he had the sudden urge to light a cigarette.

At that moment, a loud noise assaulted his ears, catching Xuan Ji off guard. He turned towards the source.

There, on one of the steles, a crack had inexplicably formed.

Part II

The Fool

The divine cannot protect the mortals, having long rotted beneath the pear tree.

Chapter 7

Sheng Lingyuan had assumed that after enduring the heavens' divine retribution, which left his body crushed and his soul scattered, he would finally be able to rest for a good ten thousand years or so. Much to his chagrin, he was rudely roused before he'd even finished his first nap. He'd had a bit of a temper during that last untimely awakening, but by this time around, he had become so numb that he couldn't even muster the energy to get annoyed.

The backlash from Dark Descent was still etched deeply into his being. Although his body had been reduced to dust and scattered to the winds, his soul still trembled in agony. Every thought brought him renewed torment. By all rights, he no longer had a body with which to rise and answer another summons... so what was happening this time? Did these brats have no other demons to call on?

Sheng Lingyuan found his "ears" overwhelmed by a din of gongs and drums, accompanied by a man's breathless yelling. He endured the noise for a moment without understanding a single

word. Headache worsening, he wondered, *Just what sort of demon is mourning here?*

Just then, footsteps approached, and he felt as if he were being lifted. The pain of having his flesh shaved away by a thousand cuts still haunted his spirit, leaving his senses dull. It was a while before he noticed: someone was scrubbing "him" with a cloth of some unknown material, rubbing hard as if they were cleaning off grime.

Sheng Lingyuan abruptly opened his "eyes" to find his entire field of vision filled by an enormous face, the nose all but touching him. With striking detail, he could see each strand of the lashes outlining a pair of graceful phoenix eyes. Their amber irises were startlingly clear, but the underlying dark circles slightly diminished their elegance.

Sheng Lingyuan froze.

He recognised this face. It belonged to that tricky little yao from Chiyuan—though how he'd ended up in his hands was a mystery. He watched the little yao blow on him before returning to his furious scrubbing. "Why won't it come off?" he groaned.

The audacity!

As he continued muttering to himself, the little yao leant away slightly. Only then did Sheng Lingyuan notice something odd about his perspective—it was as if he were lying in the little yao's arms.

The little yao had changed into strange-looking clothes woven from fine threads of unknown fibre. The cream-white garment had astonishingly exquisite craftsmanship. Despite living among mortals, he clearly enjoyed a pampered life. How else

could he have been wearing something so luxurious? Though Sheng Lingyuan couldn't fathom why he was dressed like a sheep, the soft material felt undeniably pleasant. The little yao's warmth radiated through the fabric, offering Sheng Lingyuan comfort, evoking from him a silent sigh. The lingering ache from his torturous ordeal began to ease, clearing his mind somewhat.

He tried to sense his own body. It felt strange, as if some barrier lay between him and the world. He could "see" and "hear", but not from his usual senses. Had he... been bound to some kind of object?

"This has never happened before..." muttered the little yao—Xuan Ji—as he picked up the small, flat "box" that could transmit voices over vast distances. Sheng Lingyuan heard him command, "Search for 'how to clean bloodstain from sword'."

The box responded in a monotonous female voice, "Here are some websites related to 'how to clean bloodstain from sword'."

" 'Visit a bathhouse'... What the...? Oh, it's a gaming forum. 'Polish it with a silk cloth'... As if I hadn't tried *that* already!" Xuan Ji frowned and reconsidered his approach. After all, most people hadn't had to deal with a paranormal situation like cleansing a sword of blood that stubbornly refused to come off. He changed his question. "Search for, uh... 'how to clean period blood from trousers'."

Sheng Lingyuan didn't understand the words, but he could sense that nothing good would come of this.

As it turned out, this little yao was not as simple as he had first appeared. His innate element was fire, but he also carried

at least one artefact of the metal element. Although their battle had been brief, Sheng Lingyuan could tell that Xuan Ji's raw power surpassed that of many great yao of old. Yet strangely, his cultivation was quite unremarkable, and he was thoroughly lacking in basic knowledge. He had initially avoided using his techniques in front of mortals and even refrained from drawing his sword. He behaved like an ignorant child—full of raw strength, but clueless of the proper way to wield it. Was it because he'd grown up among mortals and lacked the guidance of an elder? But if that were the case, how had he acquired such unfathomable power to begin with? Could he have been born with it? Then what breed of yao was he?

As Sheng Lingyuan's mind churned, his unease grew—largely due to the little yao's restless hand. One of his hands fiddled with that "little box" as he continued mumbling at it. The other, left idle, tapped on him to the beat of the background drum. As if the tapping weren't enough, he soon began humming along to the rhythm. What had started as one man's growling and howling had become a chaotic, off-key duet.

Tsk. Sheng Lingyuan's thoughts were scattered by the noise, and he came to a conclusion: *He must be a braying donkey.*

Just then, a resounding "ding-dong" cut off the donkey's caterwauling. Xuan Ji shouted a response before getting up and walking away, giving Sheng Lingyuan's ears a reprieve.

Left alone, Sheng Lingyuan felt himself lying on a bedlike surface—long, narrow, and unbelievably soft. The moment he sank into it, he felt as though he'd fallen into some undiscovered paradise. Marvelling at the sensation, he took the opportunity

to survey the room.

The space felt cramped, mainly due to its low ceiling, square and white. Without visible beams, its interior resembled a coffin. Still, the ceiling was just high enough that an average person could comfortably stand upright. The lighting was excellent, as the entire southern wall was made of windows. A thin, sheer curtain hung halfway across, allowing patchy sunlight to fill half the room. The windows were lined with luxurious "crystals", just like the ones in that place called the "hospital"—but these looked much cleaner and brighter.

In the middle of the ceiling was a round disc that Sheng Lingyuan guessed was used for illumination. He had seen similar ones hanging in the hospital, though their shape had been slightly different. The other furniture appeared peculiar too. At first glance, it seemed shabby, pieced together from some thin and rough wooden boards. But upon closer inspection, each piece seemed to hold some profound, hidden mystery. He was hesitant to jump to conclusions about his surroundings.

The room wasn't spotless, but it certainly wasn't dirty or disorganised. It had a comfortable, lived-in feel—or it would have, if not for the cacophony. On a short cabinet in the corner sat a square box containing a spinning black disc. Sheng Lingyuan had no idea what manner of cursed object this was, but ghastly wailings emanated from it ceaselessly.

Just then, the little yao returned with a young man whom Sheng Lingyuan had never seen before. He greeted the newcomer with familiarity: "Have a seat. Anything to drink?"

The guest wore a dark blue "robe" and had a rather upright

appearance, though his brows were currently furrowed with frustration. Sheng Lingyuan scrutinised him for a moment and thought, *A mortal, yet with a faint trace of Leize beast*[1].

A sudden realisation hit him. Right. Hadn't the little yao mentioned that the Bureau of Peace had been gone for nearly a millennium? Those hybrids who blended in with the mortals... If they had descendants, their bloodlines must have thinned considerably by now.

The visitor was none other than Xiao Zheng, and he had exhaustion written all over his face. The moment he stepped through the door, the death metal assaulting his ears nearly gave him a stroke. "Would you get your sound system an exorcist? Are your neighbours deaf? I can't believe they haven't complained yet..." He massaged his temples in agony. "I'll have a bottle of water."

"It's a weekday during work hours. I have the day off, but everyone else is at work." Xuan Ji grabbed a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and tossed it to Xiao Zheng. Then, he casually moved Sheng Lingyuan from the sofa and leant him against the corner wall.

Sheng Lingyuan felt that the object he was bound to must have been at least half as tall as a person—and quite heavy, as it hit the floor with a thud. A vague suspicion arose in his mind. And as soon as Xuan Ji walked away, a large, ridiculously clear mirror in the other corner of this inner chamber reflected his

1. Leize beast, from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. "Within the thunder lake Leize is the Thunder God, with the body of a dragon and head of a man. Thunder strikes fall at the drum of his belly."

form.

Sure enough. Sheng Lingyuan's head throbbed. *It really is that greatsword.*

The blade was over a metre long and extremely heavy. Sheng Lingyuan remembered the little yao drawing the weapon from his own spine, so it must have been his lifebound artefact. The little yao belonged to the fire element, which suggested that he was born with intensely hot *yang* energy. That energy should have been wholly incompatible with anything cold and *yin*—especially himself, the epitome of both. Yet, rather than rejecting him, the little yao's lifebound sword was nurturing him with care.

How quaint.

While Sheng Lingyuan puzzled over this, Xuan Ji sat down with his legs crossed and casually produced a bowl of nuts from beneath the coffee table. He asked Xiao Zheng, "Have you been pulling all-nighters these past few days?"

"Mhm. We've got the Bi Chunsheng situation mostly figured out. The field agent who leaked information about the Mirage Butterflies to her has confessed, and his account matches hers. Our tech team reviewed her intranet account and discovered that she repeatedly viewed cases handled by Gong Chenggong, your predecessor in the DRD. She also paid close attention to anyone ranked squad leader or higher who lost fewer than half of their points under the 'Fifteen-Strike Rule'—including me." Xiao Zheng was parched by now. He uncapped the bottle and downed half the water in one gulp, his tight grip making the plastic creak. "We also pulled up the surveillance footage from

around Gong Chenggong's house. Bi Chunsheng had been tailing him for quite some time. But that anonymous report may not have come from her—or at least, we haven't found solid proof that it did. The letter detailed Gong Chenggong's corruption and bribery, but personally, I doubt she'd dug up that much yet. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been cool-headed enough to write about her findings. She'd have skinned him alive first."

"So, she was only investigating him and never made a move?"

"No, she never got the chance. Gong Chenggong may be an ordinary human, but he's messed with enough people's memories during his tenure at the DRD to know how to protect his own secrets. He was always cautious and carried multiple devices that blocked psychic attacks twenty-four seven." Xiao Zheng shook his head. "Bi Chunsheng had long been suspicious of the butterfly situation, but it wasn't until she opened her father's skull that she confirmed it. By then, Gong Chenggong had already been quietly detained and fell into a coma."

"Where did she get the butterfly eggs?"

"They were from the same jar Gong Chenggong stole thirty years ago. We found it in her house, still almost half full. After analysing her dashcam footage, we traced several properties to Gong Chenggong—all registered under shell companies and held by proxies. They were very well hidden, and we probably wouldn't have found them, had it not been for her investigation. At one of these properties, there had been a recent burglary. The police had been called, but since nothing was reported missing, they dropped the case. That place had a well-concealed room containing traces of anomalous energy. That was likely where

Gong Chenggong had been storing the butterfly eggs. The only thing we still don't know is... how she learnt Dark Descent."

Xuan Ji grabbed a handful of pistachios, cracked one open, and popped the kernel into his mouth, offering no comment. There had been another detail—one he wasn't sure anyone else had caught. Or maybe they'd dismissed it as Bi Chunsheng's mad ravings, given the chaos at the time. The Demonic Revenant she'd summoned had been, at first, perfectly willing to help her get revenge. His attitude had even been quite amiable. But then, he suddenly turned on her—right after she mentioned the Crimson Abyss.

Why had Bi Chunsheng suddenly brought up the Crimson Abyss? And what exactly had she wanted with it that provoked the Demonic Revenant to the point of obliterating their pact, even at the cost of divine retribution?

"As for the agents who colluded with Gong Chenggong and used Mirage Butterflies to cover up casualty counts, the Bureau has launched an official investigation."

"Ah." Xuan Ji snapped out of his thoughts.

"In theory, the DRD is supposed to assist with internal investigations. But this time, since the issue originated within the DRD..."

"Cooperate with the investigation, right?" Xuan Ji nodded, unfazed. He was new to the department and had nothing to do with this mess, after all. Work suspended for investigation? As far as he was concerned, that was perfect. He'd still get paid, and he wouldn't even have to lift a finger. It would practically be a paid holiday. Grinning ear to ear, he said, "No problem. We'll

drop everything and cooperate fully."

"Cooperate, my ass. It's not as if you're the one being investigated." Xiao Zheng waved his hand irritably. "What I mean is that Mr Huang wants me to lead the internal investigation. But with so many people involved—both field agents and logistics staff—I can't say for sure that even I am... entirely clean. So we need someone with no vested interest in any department to oversee the whole process."

Xuan Ji reflexively brown-nosed the chief director. "A meticulous move by Mr Huang. As expected of a seasoned leader."

"The one he's referring to is *you*."

Xuan Ji paused, then raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Sure, he'd earned a place in the ARB through his own ability—but to say that he'd become the director of the DRD on merit alone? That would be shameless. Xiao Zheng had brought him in as a neutral party to investigate the DRD from within. And even Xiao Zheng couldn't have foreseen that this investigation into another department—one he had absolutely nothing to do with—would eventually turn its head on him. But to anyone unaware of these details, the two of them looked to be in cahoots.

Then what was the chief director thinking, assigning him to supervise Xiao Zheng? Was he really so convinced that Xuan Ji was selflessly impartial and had absolute integrity?

"That's right, it's you," Xiao Zheng murmured. "I even told him I was the one who recommended you to the Bureau, in case he hadn't known. But he still... I don't understand it."

"You and I aren't exactly strangers, you know. You don't have

to play all innocent with me." Xuan Ji spat out a pistachio shell. "Mr Huang's message can't be more obvious—'don't rock the boat.'"

Xiao Zheng shot him a distressed look.

"Fine. Let me ask you this," Xuan Ji continued. "Those butterfly larvae or eggs or whatever... When the field agents used them to infect people, weren't they worried about the infection spreading?"

"That wouldn't happen," Xiao Zheng explained. "The butterfly eggs kept by the Bureau undergo special treatment. Once they infect a host, they lose the ability to reproduce. When the host's body dies, so does the butterfly."

Xuan Ji shrugged. "Well, there you have it. If they can't spread, then there's no risk to the population at large. Why investigate further?"

A vein on Xiao Zheng's forehead began to throb. He had known Xuan Ji long enough to sense when the latter was about to start spewing bullshit.

Xuan Ji's next statements didn't disappoint. "Look. People who've been infected are living their lives just fine, and their friends and families are none the wiser. Everyone's just going about their lives, and what's so wrong with that? Say we dig deeper and bring this whole thing to the surface. What do we do if we discover that thousands of people are infected? Round them all up and toss them in a furnace? The ARB's here to maintain stability—not generate mass panic. Take the DRD for example: we're here to wipe people's asses. No matter how big a mess they've made, we wipe it clean with nice, soft napkins...

We may not get all the shit out, but it's not like we can just use sandpaper and start causing our own casualties, right?"

Xuan Ji's tongue really must have had metanatural abilities of its own, for he was able to rattle off this tirade with perfect enunciation, all the while scarfing down nuts.

Xiao Zheng had always known that Xuan Ji was hardly a model citizen, but he hadn't realised just how lax his moral standards could be. All this "shit" talk nearly caused him to pop a blood vessel. He slammed the table and snatched the bowl away. "Do you even hear yourself? Stop crackling like a parrot!"

Xuan Ji remained unfazed by Xiao Zheng's outburst. "The 'Fifteen-Strike Rule' is a joint responsibility system. Sure, some people used the butterflies to cover up casualties out of self-interest, but I'm sure there are others who did it to protect their colleagues. Say someone is truly innocent—like you. If we dig into this, how can we be sure your former superiors are also innocent?" Xuan Ji lifted his eyes, the cynicism behind his gaze unsettling. "If they aren't, how can you prove you had no knowledge of their deeds, given that you reaped the benefits?"

Xiao Zheng was unable to argue.

Had he really been oblivious to Mr Huang's intent? Impossible. He might have been straightforward and blunt, but after so many years in the ARB, he certainly wasn't some naive simpleton. He just didn't want to follow that train of thought.

Xuan Ji was his friend. He had stood by Xiao Zheng through life and death situations, and he wasn't afraid of offending him in private conversations. In just a few short exchanges, he'd stripped away Xiao Zheng's thin veil of self-deception, leaving

his conscience bare. Xiao Zheng felt utterly ashamed. "So... are we just going to let the living stumble on blindly while the dead died for nothing?" he asked, bewildered.

Warm on the outside but cold at heart, Xuan Ji thought to himself with indifference: *Isn't that how it always goes?*

After sending Xiao Zheng away with that lukewarm, watery bowl of chicken soup for the soul, Xuan Ji whipped up a modest meal of three dishes and some soup for himself. Having sated his hunger, he retreated to his study clutching the sword stained with indelible blood. He set the sword aside, put on a pair of gloves, and gingerly opened a small box. He pulled out a stack of tattered bamboo slips—the remnants of ancient texts.

Xuan Ji had brought these slips with him from the ancient city in the depths of the Crimson Abyss. They were said to have been gathered by his forebears. Due to improper storage, their protective spells had long since worn away, leaving them in a state of near ruin. Xuan Ji could only chalk this up to "family misfortune". Of his thirty-five predecessors, surely one would have thought to transcribe these fragile relics for preservation. Had they all been work-shy wastrels?

These slips had been the only fruition of his trip to the Crimson Abyss. He hadn't been able to stay long. That was partly because he'd just started his new job and hadn't accumulated much leave. But it was also because, during his visit, one of the stone steles near the altar had spontaneously shattered. It cracked open, then disintegrated into dust before he'd even had a chance to repair the fissure.

When the stele broke, Xuan Ji's first thought hadn't been

"it's time to renovate the ancestral altar". Instead, he was overcome by inexplicable dread. Though nothing had happened to warrant it, his body was suddenly flooded with fear-related hormones, as if his entire system had gone haywire. A voice in his mind screamed for him to leave the Crimson Abyss, as though calamity would befall him if he lingered a moment longer. He'd barely managed to have Sabre One hastily gather the ancient texts related to "Demonic Revenants" and "lifebound swords" before bolting.

Three days had passed since his return to Yong'an. In that time, he'd finalised all of the paperwork for his new job and familiarised himself with the Bureau's policies. But now, the most pressing matter for Xuan Ji was cleaning the blood from his lifebound sword so that he could return it to his spine. He realised that the longer he stayed separate from it, the more restless he grew. Three days and two nights after the sword vacated his spine, Xuan Ji had become unable to sleep without clutching it to his chest. If he accidentally released it, he would jolt awake within seconds. Just last night, he'd woken up over twenty times, and each rare moment of sleep had been plagued by chaotic dreams. If this continued, he was sure he'd have a nervous breakdown.

"Hey buddy..." Xuan Ji murmured as he traced the blade with his fingers, taking solace in the cool metal, "what on earth is going on with you?"

Enduring the poking and prodding, Sheng Lingyuan didn't bother to respond. He glanced around the study, finding little of interest aside from a large "crystal box" on one wall. Inside

were rows of "sculpted statues", all resembling one another. He couldn't sense any spiritual energy from them; they were clearly ordinary toys. He thought to himself, *This brat hasn't even been weaned yet, has he?*

Feeling "recharged" from holding the sword, Xuan Ji carefully set it down beside his figure cabinet and began poring over the texts. Though Sabre One was loyal and dependable, his memory was muddled due to his advanced age, and it often failed him. Xuan Ji suspected that he'd pulled out anything and everything related to demons, regardless of its usefulness.

Ancient texts were notoriously difficult to decipher. Not only were the characters obscure, but the handwriting was often barely legible. Xuan Ji could only cross-reference each word in a dictionary and make educated guesses. It was a slow, painstaking process.

"*Dongchuan... Shaman Records...* Probably not this one," Xuan Ji muttered, setting aside a bamboo slip. "*Meditative Exorcism Manual...* Looks like it's for physical training, not relevant... *Legend of the Demon Stone...* What's this bullshit?!"

He'd gotten unusually poor sleep to begin with, and now, with a full belly... Well, maybe research had never been Xuan Ji's strong suit. After a while, the words on the slips began to blur. His eyelids grew heavy, and before he knew it, he had drifted off with the dictionary as his pillow.

Xuan Ji emerged in a pitch-black space. He realised that he was probably dreaming and grew excited, for lucid dreams always seemed to carry some sort of message. Curious to see what this one had in store for him, Xuan Ji made no attempt to wake

himself up. Instead, he pressed forward through the darkness.

Suddenly, he bumped into something. Xuan Ji snapped his fingers, and a small flame flickered to life at his fingertip, illuminating a massive iron door. The paper seals plastered all over it caught his eye, their crimson hue calling to mind his shattered ring. The door had a bumpy surface, as though it were embossed with intricate patterns. Curious, Xuan Ji brought his flame closer to inspect one of the protrusions—only to recoil in shock. It wasn't a design, but a clear handprint!

He instinctively took several steps back and looked up. The entire door was covered in handprints, footprints, and other projections no doubt made by body parts slamming into it. It was as though someone were trapped on the other side, desperately trying to break free!

A loud thud reverberated from behind the door. The flame on Xuan Ji's fingertip quavered, then fizzled out. In the absolute darkness there echoed the dull, frenzied sounds of flesh ramming repeatedly against iron. A chill coursed down Xuan Ji's spine, and the hair on his nape stood on end. Yet like a black hole, the door seemed to have an eerie pull. Despite being gripped by overwhelming terror, Xuan Ji didn't flee. Instead, he found himself oddly compelled to reach out and touch it.

Just as his hand was about to make contact, a piercing ring assaulted his ears. A blinding light cleaved through the nightmare, yanking Xuan Ji out of the dreamscape. As he jolted awake, the sounds of someone pounding on the door continued to echo in his mind—along with a faint, anguished whimper that sounded like "Your Majesty..."

When Xuan Ji opened his eyes, he was drenched in cold sweat. His mind was blank for a few seconds before he realised that his phone was ringing. Rubbing his face where the dictionary had left an indent, he picked up the call with a sigh. "Mr Xiao, have you finally thought things through, or do you have new instructions—"

"That boy who'd been infected—something's wrong," Xiao Zheng interrupted. "The butterfly they extracted from him... it's contagious!"

The Dark Descent's lightning strikes had left HQ's lobby in disarray. The ten lowest floors of the building were sealed off for repairs, and even the Foundation Tree was secured in an airtight encirclement of protective steel plates. Xuan Ji had no choice but to detour through the car park. He couldn't part with his sword, so unbeknownst to him, he brought a great Demonic Revenant right into the heart of the Anomaly Regulation Bureau.

Basement level 59 was the "isolation zone", reserved for storing dangerous specimens that the Bureau didn't yet know how to handle. Its entrance was guarded by no fewer than three security checkpoints. Trapped within the sword, Sheng Lingyuan was forced to go through three different scanners. By the end, he'd given up on getting angry and resigned himself to his fate.

When Xiao Zheng's call came through, His Demonic Majesty had been resting his eyes—not that he'd had any such intentions. He'd been intrigued by the bamboo slip fragments the little yao laid out, for they emitted a familiar aura. He had hoped

the little yao would let him catch a glimpse of the text. But to his dismay, that simpleton had barely read two lines before collapsing onto the desk and beginning to snore.

There was an undeniable connection between a lifebound sword and its master, for as soon as Xuan Ji fell asleep, an overwhelming feeling of drowsiness permeated the sword, pulling the Demonic Revenant along into slumber. Xiao Zheng's call had not only interrupted Xuan Ji's nightmare but also jolted Sheng Lingyuan awake. That was when he realised: the sword was like a sanctuary of absolute comfort. After a short rest within, the sea of his consciousness had become tranquil, and even the lingering torment from having been flayed alive had vanished almost entirely. The thought sent a chill through him.

There was something strange about this weapon.

Sheng Lingyuan despised pleasant things. Anything that made him feel at ease—or simply brought no pain—immediately roused his suspicion. After all, traps were often hidden behind temptation. When he was awakened by the Dark Descent, he'd been in a daze and hadn't even understood the summoner's words. Yet, the unmistakable resentment and murderous intent had given him a rough understanding of what was happening.

Who then had trapped him in this sword?

The most obvious suspect was the greatsword's owner, the little yao himself. He may have been acting innocent, even going as far as exposing his vulnerable heartbeat and breath, but he was a naturally endowed yao. Could he truly remain unaware of a demonic soul's presence right at his bedside? What was he playing at?

Oblivious to the conspiracies his sword was weaving about him, Xuan Ji arrived at the isolation zone. He had barely taken a step inside when several people rushed past him carrying an occupied cryogenic pod.

"Who's that?"

"A field agent. He was part of the team that found the boy." Xiao Zheng strode over. "Several frontline agents have shown symptoms of 'sudden personality shifts' after coming into contact with him. They mostly presented in trivial ways. If the Mirage Butterfly situation hadn't thrown the Bureau into hypervigilance, these symptoms might have gone unnoticed, and the consequences would have been disastrous. The Mirage Butterfly's incubation period is about fifteen to thirty days before it causes brain death in the host. We've secretly quarantined everyone the boy has come into contact with over the past month. Come look."

Xiao Zheng led Xuan Ji through a door marked with a "Danger" sign. In the centre of the room, behind layers of glass, was a minuscule butterfly—no larger than a fingertip. "This is the butterfly they extracted from the boy. It's still alive."

There was a magnifying lens attached to the enclosure for inspection. Xuan Ji had never seen a Mirage Butterfly before, so he strode over for a closer look. The butterfly's body had an iridescent shimmer, and each wing bore a tiny human face. As Xuan Ji approached, the faces' expressions shifted; what had been two smiles morphed into a look of terror on the left wing, and one of anguish on the right.

Did I just make the butterfly cry? Do I really look that scary?

Xuan Ji wondered. Before he could get a better look, the butterfly began to beat its wings rapidly. Flying haphazardly within its prison, it repeatedly slammed its body into the glass. Then, it suddenly vanished.

Xuan Ji recoiled instinctively.

"Don't worry, it can't escape the containment enclosure. It's still inside, just invisible." Xiao Zheng paused, frowning as he scrutinised Xuan Ji. "But Mirage Butterflies only turn invisible after infecting a human host. They've never been observed to do so for no apparent reason. Why is it behaving so strangely around you?"

"They say beauties can make the moon hide and the flowers blush," Xuan Ji quipped, rubbing his face. "What do you think, Mr Xiao? Could it be that my bewitching visage made the butterfly bashful?"

Xiao Zheng rolled his eyes. *Why couldn't those lightning bolts strike this shameless idiot dead?*

Xuan Ji flopped into a chair. "So, how's this butterfly different from the neutered ones you were talking about?"

Xiao Zheng opened his laptop and pulled up some enlarged photos. "See here, on the left? That's the butterfly we found on the body of Bi Chunsheng's husband. It has three black lines on its abdomen. The one on the right is the one you just saw. It doesn't have those lines. According to historical records, the Mirage Butterfly eggs had been sealed away by ancient metahumans. As the number of metahumans declined over the generations, the eggs became too dangerous for their descendants to safeguard, so they were handed over to the Bureau. We believe

that when those ancient experts sealed the eggs, they might have treated them to ensure that they wouldn't spread through the human population, even after infection."

"And how has this special butterfly been spreading?"

"Based on what we currently know, the infection seems to be transmitted through direct contact."

"Just great." Xuan Ji snapped his fingers. "Even the zombie virus in *Resident Evil* had to be transmitted through a bite. Have you examined the eggs from the jar Bi Chunsheng stole?"

"The lab is looking into whether they can reproduce. They're speeding up the hatching process by simulating a human environment, but we don't have the results yet."

"Then, what about that moustached guy? That last sacrifice, Ji Qingchen? How's the butterfly that infected him?"

"The last sacrifice was shot in the head with a mithril bullet. The butterfly in his brain was destroyed, so we couldn't confirm anything."

"This is becoming tricky," Xuan Ji sighed, leaning back. "I'm not even sure which result would be worse. If those eggs Bi Chunsheng used turn out to be contagious, we'd better hope she was the one who planted the butterfly in that kid, or we're in trouble."

Xuan Ji's "midnight ghost story" voice made Xiao Zheng's scalp prickle.

"What Bi Chunsheng did has a time frame and a trail," Xuan Ji continued. "Following it is just a matter of putting in the work. But if that kid's butterfly came from somewhere else, then... who infected him? How many others had they infected?

Could Mirage Butterflies be spreading among the population already? What if everyone on earth—except for the two of us—has already become a mindless husk puppeteered by a butterfly? Hey, maybe we are too—we just don't know it yet, and we're still playing a childish game of 'cops and robbers'. It's Zhuangzi's butterfly dream all over again."

Xiao Zheng's face turned visibly green. "Dream, my ass. Shut up!"

"Come on, let's stay optimistic and look at this rationally," Xuan Ji slowly intoned, shifting the conversation. "There's nothing new under the sun, and humans have been around for thousands of years. If a large-scale butterfly infection could happen, wouldn't it have happened already? Why would it have waited until now just to fall in your lap? It's not like you're the chosen one."

"Get out!" Xiao Zheng shot back. Then he frowned as Xuan Ji's words finally clicked. "Wait, what do you mean?"

"Have you ever considered that, for Mirage Butterflies, being sterile might be the norm?"

"You mean, they don't reproduce sexually?"

"Perhaps they don't reproduce at all."

"Nonsense. There's no animal that doesn't reproduce..."

"Oh, but there is," Xuan Ji shot back. "Ever heard of mules? I can tell you've never spent a day of your life farming, young master."

At that, Xiao Zheng choked on his own saliva.

"Like mules, I suspect these butterflies are a product of our ancestors' so-called wisdom. My righteous comrade Xiao, do

you really think Mirage Butterflies came to exist naturally? If they did, why do you suppose they only ever latch onto humans? To a parasite, why would a human's brain be any different from, say, a pig's?"

This line of thought made Xiao Zheng shudder.

Xuan Ji tapped on Xiao Zheng's chest and smirked. "Demons, yao, ghosts, monsters—none are more vicious than the human heart." He ran the back of his index finger along the sword's blade as though playing with fire, his movements agile yet perilous. The sword couldn't be returned to its "sheath", so it remained out in full view. It looked heavy and ancient, and its twin edges were sharpened into fine lines. Bloodstains stubbornly clung to the metal like arcane hieroglyphics, giving it a sinister aura.

As his lingering pain subsided, Sheng Lingyuan's senses had grown sharper. He could now feel the faintest brush against the sword's metal—even the pulse beneath the little yao's skin. Patient as a prowling predator, the Demonic Revenant tolerated the touch. However, as he gazed at the barely visible vein, he felt something rise up within him, distracting him from the conversation—an ancient, long forgotten hunger.

It was a craving for blood.

Sheng Lingyuan steadied himself. His memory may have been like a torn, empty sack, but he was certain he'd never had this kind of appetite before. He wasn't sure if what he thirsted for was simply blood—or this little yao's blood specifically. It was a novel sensation, and he savoured the odd thrill of it.

As if sensing danger, Xuan Ji pulled his hand away and turned

to Xiao Zheng. "Remember what the files said about the Mirage Butterfly?" Without waiting for a reply, he recited, " 'Mirage Butterfly, Class-1 dangerous entity, a parasite that only infects humans. Its larvae and eggs can remain dormant for long periods of time. Once mature, it loses the ability to infect new hosts. If removed from its host, or upon the host's death, the mature insect typically dies within one hour.' "

Xuan Ji then pointed at the enclosure behind him. The little butterfly had reappeared after he stepped away and was resting on the glass wall. "Look at it. It was removed from its host days ago, but it still seems pretty lively to me."

From his pocket, Xiao Zheng produced a wallet made from crocodile leather. "Starting right now, I'll give you a hundred yuan for every minute you talk *sense*."

According to rumour, Mr Xiao's family had amassed a fortune through mining. Without need of money, it was said that he worked for personal fulfilment rather than a paycheque. These whispers, it seemed, weren't entirely groundless.

"Sir, yes, sir!" Given monetary incentive, Xuan Ji readily adopted the demeanour of a model employee. "This is one of the reasons it's so hard to detect Mirage Butterfly victims. Think about it—if the butterfly could reproduce inside a host and survive outside the human body, what would happen? After the hosts' deaths, swarms of colourful butterflies would emerge from their every orifice. My dear sir, we'd have witnessed countless horrific reenactments of 'The Butterfly Lovers' by now."

Just as he finished speaking, a researcher wearing full protective gear rushed into the room, panting for breath. "Mr Xiao, we

have the results! The eggs from the jar found at Bi Chunsheng's house are all sterile. They can't reproduce!"

"So then, our question becomes..." Xuan Ji mused, rubbing his chin, "what's so special about that Dongchuan boy?"

"We've checked all his connections. There is nothing linking him to the ARB, directly or indirectly," Xiao Zheng quickly explained. "The only related person he interacted with was the final sacrifice, Ji Qingchen. Nothing particularly notable about him either. He earned a living as a content creator and livestreamer, focusing on sensationalistic subject matter. He would go anywhere for a story. But if a person spends enough time walking in the dark, he'll eventually bump into some 'real ghosts'. As we've discovered, he got caught up in an incident with a man-eating beast. Bi Chunsheng had been in charge of the operation and saved his life."

"He was the *last* sacrifice. Being 'nothing notable' is quite notable in itself," Xuan Ji remarked. "This guy's uploaded over forty shorts and recorded more than ten livestreams. I've gone through all of them in the last few days and—"

"You watched *all of them*? In just a few days?" Xiao Zheng was taken aback. He'd never expected the laid-back Xuan Ji to be so thorough in his work.

"Well, yeah." Xuan Ji shrugged, surprised by Xiao Zheng's extreme reaction. "I just went through them whenever I was free. Don't you usually scroll through shorts to kill time? You know, while waiting for a ride, in the shower, on the loo, eating... You don't watch food shows when you're eating? Then what do your eyes eat, when you know, your mouth... eats."

Xiao Zheng paused. After some time, he replied, "Books."

"You're kidding!" Xuan Ji was stunned.

For a moment, they stared blankly at one another: the internet-addicted youth and the stern, militant cadre. Each found the other impossible to comprehend. But Mr Xiao still needed Xuan Ji's help, so he begrudgingly set aside their fundamental worldview differences for the moment. "What were you saying about his videos?"

"Out of the forty or so shorts, most are about him solving 'supernatural problems' for people. It's all mystic mumbo-jumbo, classic con artist stuff," Xuan Ji said. "He's got a steady group of followers who go around telling people how this 'spiritual master' saved their lives."

"Paid actors, you mean? What do you call them... *shills*?"

"Not necessarily. Their stories vary, and each one has a lot of unique details. That seems like a lot of effort to go to if they were just shills. But there is a pattern. They're all sceptics who just happen to meet this spiritual master when he predicts an impending disaster in their future. Naturally, they don't believe him at first—but then, a few days later, they're 'possessed by a wandering ghost'. The symptoms? They remain conscious but can't control their own bodies. They desperately try to signal for help, but their families don't understand. In the end, it's always this spiritual master who 'saves' them. Sound familiar?"

Xiao Zheng paused in thought. "You think Ji Qingchen may have encountered the Mirage Butterfly or something similar?"

Xuan Ji shot him a roguish smirk, lifting the sword to check his reflection in the blade. Then, he glanced at his watch before

pulling 500 yuan out of Xiao Zheng's wallet without the slightest reservation.

"Five minutes and twenty seconds. I'll round off the change—buddy discount. I want to go over to Dongchuan and do some digging into Ji Qingchen's background. That DRD jet—can you get someone in the cockpit and ready to fly?" He handed the wallet back to Xiao Zheng. Not wanting to say too much in front of the researcher, he gave Xiao Zheng a meaningful smile. "Don't worry."

Xiao Zheng froze, having grasped the implication behind Xuan Ji's words—*Don't worry. if this mutated butterfly is an isolated incident, we just have to trace the cause and minimise the impact. Things won't get out of hand.*

Yet, the reassurance sat heavy on Xiao Zheng's stomach.

Xuan Ji picked up his greatsword and turned to leave. Inside the blade, the Demonic Revenant was still puzzling over the most recent series of unfamiliar phrases. *Why did he suddenly start talking about chickens?*

Because of the ongoing internal investigation, the atmosphere throughout the ARB was tense. In particular, the members of the ill-fated DRD were wishing their department could fall through a hole in the ground.

When Xuan Ji stepped into the office, he felt like he'd stumbled into a greenhouse. The walls were lined with freshly trimmed plant cuttings arranged in plastic water bottles.

A nervous Luo Cuicui explained, "Whenever I'm anxious, my fingers and toes start growing uncontrollably, so I've had to

trim them... Um, are there any instructions for today, sir?"

The lush greenery was certainly pleasing to the eye, but the knowledge that some of it had sprouted through Luo Cuicui's socks made Xuan Ji suspect that the office possessed a certain *smell*. Xuan Ji paused mid-step and drew back slightly before addressing the team. "Luo Cuicui, Ping Qianru, and... um... Forget it. I don't really know the rest of you. You two, grab someone else and come with me—we're going to Dongchuan. Anyone else who's free, please tidy up the office. Thanks."

The DRD's rules were strict. To avoid overspending, the department's private jet couldn't be used by a team of fewer than four. Now that Bi Chunsheng was gone, a young man in a hoodie was pulled in to make up the numbers. Thirty minutes later, he boarded the plane with Xuan Ji, Luo Cuicui, and Ping Qianru.

The newcomer was in his twenties, with thick, slanted eyebrows and a neck that seemed a little too short, giving him a permanently hunched look. He wore a perpetual frown despite his youth and was carrying a towering stack of books.

"This is Yang Chao from our department," Luo Cuicui explained. "He's got an incredible memory and knows everything. If you ever need to know about something, it's usually faster to ask him than to go digging through HQ's files."

Yang Chao was about to greet Xuan Ji when his face abruptly contorted, and he erupted into a series of tumultuous sneezes.

Xuan Ji reeled back. "Uh... Don't push yourself if you're not feeling well. We can always swap someone else in."

"I'm fine, sir. I've got rhinitis, and it flares up any time I'm

stressed or anxious." Yang Chao fished a crumpled mask out of his pocket and put it on before adding in a muffled voice, "Don't worry about me."

Xuan Ji wasn't entirely convinced of Hoodie's dependability, but after a moment's hesitation, he decided not to dwell on the matter. After all, they only needed him for the headcount. Even someone unreliable was a significant improvement over the summoner of a Demonic Revenant.

"You brought books on a business trip?"

"I'm studying for my postgraduate exams," Yang Chao replied honestly. "If I pass, I'll have to quit this job, so I want to save up as much as I can. When we're on business trips, our department gives us an allowance and pays for meals. This saves me a whole day's food expenses, so I'm really grateful for the opportunity."

Hearing about his meticulous planning, Xuan Ji couldn't help recalling his own bank balance, and a sudden wave of despair washed over him at the thought. He sighed. "All right, well... Let's go."

A qianyang[2], Sheng Lingyuan observed. Just as he looked over from inside the sword, Yang Chao happened to glance in his direction. The unexpected feeling of locking gazes with a weapon made Yang Chao shudder. He sneezed so violently, he all but launched the plane into flight. The Demonic Revenant was amused. *Such diluted blood, yet still so sharp.*

At that moment, a voice over the intercom announced that the craft was ready for takeoff.

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2. Qianyang, from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. "A bleating creature with the body of a sheep and tail of a horse."

Sheng Lingyuan was still pondering whether the word "take-off" held some hidden meaning when the jet began accelerating down the runway. Engines roaring, it soared into the sky. The sword hadn't been properly secured, and the sudden motion caused it to topple over.

Xuan Ji instinctively reached out to catch it, and his palm landed right on the blade's sharp edge. The sword he'd pulled from his own spine sliced cleanly through his skin, and blood began to trickle down the blade.

Chapter 8

From opposite sides of the blade, Sheng Lingyuan and Xuan Ji were both stunned. A lifebound weapon shouldn't have been able to harm its master—if such a thing were possible, Xuan Ji would have been long paralysed from repeatedly stabbing his own spine.

Sheng Lingyuan hadn't been expecting the steel "chicken" to suddenly leap into the air. Distracted by its flight, when the blade suddenly met flesh, he allowed his thirst for blood to overwhelm his reason. A human hand had thin skin and was riddled with veins—it was vulnerable. By the time Sheng Lingyuan had returned to his senses, it was too late; the greatsword had already buried itself in Xuan Ji's palm, and free-flowing blood quickly filled the groove in the blade.

Alerted by the nearby commotion, Luo Cuicui peeked over. "Oh my God! Blood!" he yelped, going pale and sprouting leaves. He immediately backed away as if the blood could burn him, vines tangling themselves around his neck. "So much blood! Stop the car—no, wait, uh... help! Somebody help!" The

plane practically shook from his agitation.

Next to him, Ping Qianru also jumped up in panic. Unfortunately, she'd forgotten about her seatbelt, which violently yanked her backwards in a shower of chocolates and cracker nuts.

Only Yang Chao remained calm. He set down his book and rose to help, but after just two steps, he started sniffling and tilted his head back; the "sneeze monster" was ready to unleash another explosion. Terrified of having a snot-covered wound, Xuan Ji quickly waved away Yang Chao's well-intentioned gesture.

The blade rooted itself in Xuan Ji's palm, greedily absorbing his life essence.

Sheng Lingyuan embodied an attitude of "What's done is done—might as well take advantage". The cut had already been made, so he decided to drink to his heart's content. He felt like he'd been frozen and starving for an aeon, and the blood was like hot broth; though it scalded his mouth, he refused to let go. More and more blood rushed into the sword, sharpening his senses. His field of vision from within the greatsword broadened until he could see everything inside the small cabin.

Amidst the rumble of the plane, Xuan Ji heard a contented sigh in his ear. "So fresh..."

The veins in Xuan Ji's arm throbbed. He dipped his other hand in his own blood and swiftly drew a complex rune on the sword, uncaring that open flames were prohibited in the plane. The blade ignited and clattered to the floor. A soft grunt echoed in Xuan Ji's ear, followed by a low chuckle—the owner of the

voice seemed unfazed by his attack.

Xuan Ji swiftly gathered the flames back into his palm before they could set off the fire alarm. In the fleeting firelight, he glimpsed a pair of eyes reflected in the sword's surface—reddened by the flames, yet smiling with affection and an odd, spine-chilling tenderness.

Having finally extricated herself from her seatbelt, Ping Qianru rushed over like a gust of wind. Worried about the dangerous sword causing further casualties, Xuan Ji stomped on the blade and kicked it under his seat. Having already gotten his fill of blood, Sheng Lingyuan didn't particularly mind the indignity of being trod on.

"Sir, are you all right?" Ping Qianru asked in a trembling voice. The sight of so much blood had her nearly in tears. "Where did you cut yourself? Did you hit an artery?"

Xuan Ji sighed weakly. "Girl, it wouldn't hurt to say something nice, you know? Don't jinx me."

"Hold on! I'll go get the first aid kit." Ping Qianru dashed off, then stopped again. "I'll be right back!"

"Yeah, yeah." Xuan Ji nodded in exasperation. "Walk slowly, don't trip."

In the end, the cut on Xuan Ji's palm had still been made by his lifebound weapon. As soon as he'd freed his hand from the blade, it immediately began to heal. In the duration of his conversation with Ping Qianru, the severed sinews had already started repairing themselves. Cradling his injured hand, Xuan Ji glanced at the hilt peeking out from under the seat with an indecipherable expression. He paused for a moment. Then,

masking his words with the noise of the engines, he murmured: "Aren't you acting a little ungrateful... 'Your Majesty'?"

Xuan Ji had started having suspicions about his sword even before his little nap at his desk. In one of the ancient texts Sabre One had gathered, he finally came across a description of a "Demonic Revenant". According to the tattered *Dongchuan Shaman Records*, "A Demonic Revenant is born from the fall of a mighty being, capable of drawing demonic energy from the world into itself. Even if its body is destroyed, it can gather demonic energy again and return to the mortal realm for as long as its obsession persists. The name of a Demonic Revenant must never be spoken or thought of. It must never be disturbed."

In simple terms, the body of a human being was like a vessel filled with water: once the vessel was broken, the water would spill out irrevocably. But a human being that became a Demonic Revenant was transformed into an entirely different kind of existence—one able to, under the right conditions, collect the water once more, even after it had been spilt.

Theoretically, a Demonic Revenant would be able to attach itself to an object that had its own sentience, but Xuan Ji wasn't entirely sure if his greatsword fit the bill. Although it had never shown signs of sentience before, he'd always felt that it was more than a simple inanimate object. The sword had been with him since his earliest memories. It seemed capable of sensing his every thought—even those he himself wasn't aware of.

But after the sword was stained with the Demonic Revenant's blood, it had grown colder, and that mysterious connection seemed to vanish. When Xiao Zheng's call jolted him awake

at noon, Xuan Ji had gotten a strong sense that something was off—from within the sword, he thought he could hear another person's breathing.

His suspicions had been all but confirmed by the mutated Mirage Butterfly. When he approached, the pair of smiling faces on its wings shifted—one's expression became terrified, but the other began to cry. The terror was understandable; Xuan Ji was an embodiment of fire, a natural bane to such entities. To the butterfly, seeing him would have been akin to facing a blazing cremator. But what about the crying face? Unless the mutation that gave the butterfly its longevity had also somehow induced multiple personality disorder, the insect must have been sensing someone—or some*thing*—other than him.

By all rights, Xuan Ji's lifebound sword should have repelled evil just as he did; no wicked entity should have been able to latch onto it. But if it were that Demonic Revenant, such a bizarre occurrence wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility. After all, even his ring had protected that demon.

When the Demonic Revenant had ignored the backlash from the Dark Descent and killed Bi Chunsheng, he uttered a few phrases only Xuan Ji had been close enough to hear. In particular, he'd used two terms that caught Xuan Ji's attention: "zhen" and "you fools". The plural "fools" implied that there were others behind Bi Chunsheng. But his use of the first-person pronoun "zhen" was even more illuminating.

Before the Great Upheaval—more precisely, before the first Battle of the Abyss—"zhen" had simply meant "I" and could have been used by anyone. Later, as King Ping's ambitions bal-

looned and he began his conquest of the Crimson Abyss, the term became reserved for the royal family's exclusive use. That meant that someone addressing himself as "zhen" had probably come from one of three backgrounds: he was someone born before King Ping's era, a subsequent ruler, or the head of a minority group that had adopted the Central Plains' imperial system. At the hospital, the Demonic Revenant had mentioned the Bureau of Peace, an organisation that hadn't existed before King Ping's time—it had been established by his son, Emperor Wu of Great Qi, Sheng Xiao. This made the second scenario the most likely.

Xuan Ji had decided to try an off-the-cuff bluff. But as soon as he spoke, a low, raspy chuckle sounded beside his ear. "So, how do you plan for me to repay this favour?"

Those words weren't especially alarming, but what followed chilled Xuan Ji to the bone. The Demonic Revenant within the sword sneered, "Trying to bluff me? Bold little brat."

Xuan Ji's mind went blank, and every hair on his body stood on end. *Shit, he can hear my thoughts!*

Sheng Lingyuan had evidently "heard" him swear—and had a similar realisation of his own.

Both men were shrewd and deeply secretive, perpetually hiding behind countless masks and countless more walls. Neither could have imagined that he would one day be forced to share his most private thoughts with a stranger of dubious intentions—the most intimate connection possible!

Their reactions were strikingly similar. Almost in unison, both immediately emptied their minds and forced themselves to

focus on a singular thought. Xuan Ji began meticulously counting the hairs on Luo Cuicui's head, while within the sword, Sheng Lingyuan began to recite some ancient, incomprehensible scripture.

Masters of deceit were able to control their microexpressions at will. The experts among them could even orchestrate their body language with fine precision. But who could control their own *thoughts*?

Luo Cuicui's hair didn't take long to go through, and soon, a stray thought popped into Xuan Ji's mind. *Damn it... What kind of bullshit situation even is this?*

Meanwhile, Sheng Lingyuan's recital was sounding increasingly strained. Xuan Ji's thoughts spiralled. *The ARB set me up! If they don't give me a fourteen-month salary bonus this year, I won't let them hear the end of it!*

Even though he couldn't understand the words of Sheng Lingyuan's chant, Xuan Ji could tell from his pronunciation that he'd repeated the same phrase four times in a row. Finally, unable to hold back, the Revenant muttered, "Whoever was responsible for the Dark Descent, I'll carve him to pieces."

Xuan Ji perked up. "So there *is* someone else behind it? Bi Chunsheng really was just a puppet?"

Sheng Lingyuan answered with two voices simultaneously. One was calm and leisurely, even accompanied by a soft chuckle: "Take a guess." The other was cold and terse: *Obviously.*

Xuan Ji rolled his eyes. *Mr Demonic Revenant, your schizo is showing.*

The divide between Sheng Lingyuan's thoughts and words

was automatic. He quickly caught himself and asked, "What does 'schizo' mean?"

" 'Schizo' means, uh..." Xuan Ji tried to explain, but as he struggled to find the right words, his mind devolved further into chaos. The cacophony swirled around in his head until it coalesced into one single thought. *I'm losing my shit here... What the hell is going on?*

No one else aboard the plane had any idea that, despite Xuan Ji's calm, impassive demeanour, his mind had just become the scene of a catastrophic traffic accident between him and his sword.

At that moment, Ping Qianru came running back with the first-aid kit. "How is your wound, sir? Do you know how to administer aid? I've never used one of these before."

"Just hand me a wet wipe." Xuan Ji lifted his hand—where blood had been gushing out mere moments ago, only a faint, pale scar remained. "And tell me, the Bureau *does* reimburse carpet cleaning fees, right?"

Seeing Ping Qianru stare blankly at his mended hand, Xuan Ji shrugged. "Sorry, you didn't get to say your goodbyes to it."

This was the benefit of working in the world of metanatural abilities. Everyone had their own unique, unimaginable powers, so discovering something bizarre about a colleague wasn't usually a cause for surprise. The last mission Ping Qianru had gone on with this new boss had involved thunder and lightning, a battle between ice and fire, and the destruction of two buildings. Compared to that unforgettable experience, what was one rapidly healing wound? She swiftly came to terms with the situ-

ation and set about helping Xuan Ji mop up blood.

Xuan Ji used the repetitive task of cleaning to empty his mind, and Sheng Lingyuan resumed his monotonous recital. By the time the blood had been wiped up, both of them had finally calmed down somewhat.

But with unfortunate timing, Xuan Ji's "Sword Addiction Syndrome" relapsed, his overwhelming urge to touch the weapon fiercer than ever. He felt like a starving man in front of a steamed bun—or an addict in withdrawal. Soon, his desperate longing overpowered all rational thought. With immense willpower, Xuan Ji resisted for five minutes before his resolve collapsed completely. He pulled the greatsword out from under his seat with trembling hands and began to "recharge".

"Insolence!" Sheng Lingyuan protested.

Avoiding the edge, Xuan Ji forlornly caressed the blade's cool, flat surface. "Senior, I'm sure you can't be happy with this situation either. Maybe you have some helpful suggestions?"

Sheng Lingyuan's reply was to the point. "Let me out."

"You think I don't want to? The problem is, I don't even know how you ended up in there!"

Sheng Lingyuan "said" nothing, but dark thoughts brewed within his mind. *If the sword's master dies, the lifebound weapon will crumble on its own.*

Desperately resisting the urge to press his face against the blade, Xuan Ji answered despondently, "All right, boss. Give me your best shot."

Sheng Lingyuan eyed the pulsating artery in Xuan Ji's neck and warned. "Little yao, might I remind you that I've become

one with this sword. Given time, I *will* be able to control it. If you don't want to wake up headless one day, you had best break it."

Xuan Ji sighed. "I'm afraid that's not something I'm capable of."

Xuan Ji's "separation anxiety" wasn't limited to the unbearable urge to "get his fix" from the sword. He couldn't even consider the *idea* of breaking it. The thought alone sent a wave of visceral pain through his body, as though it were he himself being shattered. Besides, the sword was impervious to physical damage, and its flames were capable of melting gold and cracking jade. Even if he *were* willing to sacrifice it, he had no idea how he'd pull off such a feat in the first place.

Now that they were forced to bare their all to each other, there was no longer a point in trying to hide. All of the cards were already on the table. Sheng Lingyuan confirmed his suspicion that this little yao was clueless and ignorant. Xuan Ji, meanwhile, learnt that the Demonic Revenant's alleged amnesia was no lie—his memories were a foggy jumble with no clear beginning or end. Having uncovered each other's shallow foundations, they sat together in the hum of the plane's engines. Though both were scheming the other's demise, a strange camaraderie was budding from their shared misery.

After some contemplation, Xuan Ji decided to address the issue head-on. Setting his grudges aside, he began to negotiate with the demonic interloper in his psyche. "Senior, how about we be frank and share our knowledge? We're both men of integrity, so there's nothing we can't discuss openly, right?"

Before Xuan Ji could even finish speaking, Sheng Lingyuan "heard" an accompanying irrepressible thought: *Yeah, right.*

With a smile in his voice, Sheng Lingyuan replied, "Indeed. You make an excellent point." But the thought *drivel* was sent right along with these words.

The pair exchanged a quick round of mental blows using sugar-coated insults. Realising this wasn't getting them anywhere, Xuan Ji drew on his resilience as a citizen of modern society and changed his approach. "Senior, it's clear that both of us want the other dead, but we know that's not happening anytime soon. Surely, you can't be enjoying this lack of privacy either."

Even without an explanation, Sheng Lingyuan figured out what the modern word "privacy" meant from context. After a pause, Xuan Ji heard a torrent of obscure psychic techniques flash through his mind. But before he could make sense of anything, the Revenant spoke aloud, "Harmonise the mind and spirit, enter a meditative trance, and you can eliminate distractions."

Xuan Ji said nothing.

"You can't tell me you don't even know what meditative trance is?"

Xuan Ji certainly had some basic knowledge, even if it was on the level of cultivation novels. He had read about meditation in his clan's ancient texts; people in the meditative state could go without eating or sleeping and remain unaffected by external disturbances. He understood the concept—but right now, he was on a business trip and very much on the clock. His colleagues were discussing the case and awaiting his instructions.

How could he just sit there with his eyes closed and his legs crossed?

Besides, Xuan Ji was incapable of meditation.

Sheng Lingyuan thought he had misheard. "You're incapable of *what*?" *Meditation? Then how did you manage to cultivate that form?*

Xuan Ji figured that he had some kind of physical defect preventing him from managing even the simplest forms of meditation. Back in his corporate days, his company's EAP brought in a psychological counsellor to guide the employees through "mindfulness" exercises, which were quite similar to meditation. Xuan Ji found that he could slip into a state of mind-body unity quite easily. But within a minute or two, he would invariably be jolted awake by uncontrollable shivering and an inexplicable anxiety. It was as if his body had some kind of mechanism that stopped him from entering a trance. After several failed attempts, he began to shun such activities and never participated again.

"Fascinating. I've never encountered someone unable to meditate. The world truly is full of wonders." Having looked through Xuan Ji's memories, Sheng Lingyuan added unconcernedly, "No matter. I can do it myself."

"Wait," Xuan Ji protested, "You can't just... Senior, you are very knowledgeable—surely there must be a better way? Meditation is hardly convenient."

Once Sheng Lingyuan entered a meditative trance, he would indeed be able to block their mental connection, effectively raising a barrier between their linked minds. However, the door

would be "locked" from one side, and only the Revenant would be able to unlock it whenever he wished.

A trace of amusement coloured Sheng Lingyuan's voice. "No less convenient than it is now. Let's call the matter settled."

"No! I never agreed to this. This isn't fair!"

The Demonic Revenant chuckled, then fell decisively silent. In the next moment, Xuan Ji could only make out steady, rhythmic breathing coming from his sword.

Bastard!

The plane carried them ever closer to Dongchuan, leaving the failed negotiations, together with its contrails, far behind.

"Sir, HQ just sent over the profile for Ji Qingchen, the last sacrifice in the Dark Descent ritual," Ping Qianru said, carefully scrutinising Xuan Ji's face. She couldn't shake the feeling that his stiff countenance belonged to someone being strangled cruelly by fate. "Um... would you like to hear it?"

Xuan Ji, for whom privacy was no longer a guaranteed right, replied with a grim expression, "Go ahead."

"Ji Qingchen was born in Dongchuan. After being expelled from secondary school for fighting, he worked for an MLM company that was eventually disbanded by the police. He spent the following year working at a local cultural goods shop, which may have inspired his later dive into 'Neo-Daoism'. Since then, he had gained much experience in deceiving people by selling fake remedies, offering fortune-telling services, and the like. In more recent years, following the internet boom, he had taken to posting bizarre videos online to attract attention to his scams."

So, even the art of swindling is evolving with the times.

"You youngsters might not know about the tricks these con artists use, so let me explain." Luo Cuicui must have felt that he hadn't made the most heroic impression on his boss, so he jumped in, attempting to restore his reputation. "First of all, they primarily target people who have both time and money. Particularly folks who are a little superstitious and tend to overthink things."

"Are you talking about that boy who was infected with the Mirage Butterfly?" Yang Chao joined the discussion. "If I remember correctly, he lives with his mother, right?"

"The boy's parents are divorced," Ping Qianru explained, skimming through the documents. "His mother doesn't have a formal job, and when she's not playing mahjong, she spends her days watching her son. The two live off child support from the father, a businessman with a high salary. He sends generous alimony payments each month, so they do indeed 'have both time and money'."

Luo Cuicui nodded. "Exactly. Once con artists have scoped out a target—pardon, I mean, a 'victim'—they'll lay some bait. They'll start with general 'predictions' like the number of people in the household, their roles, and any significant recent events..."

Yang Chao asked hesitantly, "Do people still fall for that? Isn't that kind of thing debunked on TV all the time?"

"The fools who get scammed don't watch those programmes. Besides, there's more to it—the next step is the 'supernatural act'. The swindlers will mention something about the victim's past. Even if the victim is sceptical and suspects the swindler of

investigating them, that's fine—the swindler will then offer to predict their future. Usually, they'll say something like, 'You'll come into unexpected wealth this month,' or 'Be careful these days, there's a mischievous spirit about.' Nine times out of ten, it'll be accurate," Luo Cuicui asserted with enthusiasm, sending spittle flying everywhere. "Maybe their financial investments mature, they get a bonus from their boss, or they make money on stocks—all of that can be called 'unexpected wealth'. The people these scammers target are wealthy to begin with, so getting extra income each month isn't that unusual.

"Or the swindler will make 'unfortunate' predictions around the end of the year, the quarter, or the term. Whether someone's working or studying, everyone's busy around those times, so blunders are inevitable. We call it 'Mercury in retrograde', but a con artist will explain it as 'mischievous spirits causing trouble'. If the scammers are really unlucky and nothing goes as predicted, that's easy to fix too. They can just get someone to toss five yuan at the victim's front door or have some hooligans slash their tyres. This way, their 'predictions' always come true! By that point, anyone who is somewhat superstitious will be seventy to eighty percent convinced."

"So how do they get the victim to believe them completely?" Ping Qianru asked curiously.

Luo Cuicui raised a finger dramatically. "They don't ask for money."

"Don't ask for money?"

"Exactly. When it's free, people are more inclined to believe it's the real deal. The final step is to tell the victim, 'A great di-

saster will befall you on a certain day. My spiritual power is too weak to save you.' You keep it vague, something like, 'You know who you've offended,' then let the victim stew on it themselves. Then you vanish into thin air before they come back looking for help. Since you left without charging a single yuan, the victim will start to panic more and more on their own. Eventually, fear will overpower their reason."

Yang Chao rubbed his permanently reddened nose. "But what if the victim gets scared and goes looking for help from someone else?"

"They won't find any," Xuan Ji interjected. "Con men all know each other, and each one has his own territory. If they want to stay in the business long-term, they know better than to go after someone else's prey." He turned to Ping Qianru. "Plumpy, make a fake account and leave a comment under one of Ji Qingchen's videos. Write that... hang on, what did the people he scammed say their symptoms were again?"

"Oh, they said they were similar to symptoms of hysteria or possession. The victims started raving about nonsensical things and acting insane. They were fully cognizant but unable to control their bodies, as though something else had 'taken over'. The victims only managed to send a distress signal to their families at times when the 'possessing ghost' was tired. But other than that boy, all of their distress messages were written in ordinary words. Sir, do you think these con artists really are using Mirage Butterflies to scam people?"

Xuan Ji's expression turned serious.

According to the *Compendium*, typical symptoms of Hu-

man-Faced Butterfly infection were nothing like that. Instead, the butterfly would start by mimicking the host's every action, manipulating their body to do whatever the host intended. At first, the host wouldn't even notice that the connection between their central nervous system and their body had been severed. A few days later, the host would start to experience minor involuntary movements such as twitches and shivers, which most people would dismiss as fatigue from overwork. That would be until the butterfly gradually gained full control of their body. Then, it would suddenly drop the act and stop following the host's will. At that point, the host would lose control of their body entirely and become helplessly trapped within it until their eventual brain death.

However, the butterfly that infected the boy was already some new, mutated form. The real worry was that these con artists might have somehow gotten their hands on Mirage Butterfly eggs and, through reckless tampering, accidentally given rise to a new variant. They had no idea of the dangers they were dealing with; they were effectively playing with live grenades, believing them to be bang snaps.

That said, the *Compendium* and that demon had both referred to the parasites as "Human-Faced Butterflies". The former didn't include their origin in its entry, but... *Could the Demonic Revenant possibly know where they came from?* Xuan Ji glanced at the greatsword in his hand as he contemplated calling Sheng Lingyuan out for answers.

Just as that thought crossed Xuan Ji's mind, Sheng Lingyuan's consciousness was shaken with near-damaging force. He was

jolted out of his trance by a booming voice that reverberated in his ears like a massive bell: "Where do the Human-Faced Butterflies come from?"

Sheng Lingyuan's ears buzzed. In that instant, Xuan Ji felt his connection with the Demonic Revenant re-establish, and a flood of chaotic memories surged into his mind. A series of haunting scenes flickered past—fields piled high with corpses of all ages, their lifeless eyes staring right at him. A cold shiver shot up Xuan Ji's spine, but before he could make sense of what he was seeing, the images abruptly vanished. He realised that Sheng Lingyuan had forcibly re-entered a meditative trance, his mind quiet once more.

"Sir?"

Ping Qianru's voice startled Xuan Ji. "Oh... What?"

The sensitive Ping Qianru had noticed the flicker of shock that passed over his features. "Do you... have any further instructions?"

Xuan Ji gave a dismissive wave. "No, that's all. Carry on, everyone."

Moments later, a comment pleading for help and promising a high reward appeared beneath one of Ji Qingchen's videos. Although his channel would never see another update, it was still a haven for fraudsters and occult enthusiasts. After laying the bait, it didn't take long for the DRD team to receive a flood of private messages, and they split up to look into their senders.

But Xuan Ji only pretended to scroll through the web as he traced his fingers slowly over his sword. The images from earlier still lingered in his mind, and they had sparked a faint suspicion.

Deciding to test his guess, Xuan Ji fixed his gaze on the greatsword and focused intently on a thought: "O' great handsome Demonic Revenant, do you like green peppers?[3]"

Sheng Lingyuan's meditation was once again disrupted. This time, it was not by a sound, but by the pungent smell of an unfamiliar plant. Strange and acrid, it overwhelmed his senses with the tang of greenery. If he'd had a physical body, he would have suffered an aneurysm by now.

Xuan Ji immediately felt the sword's temperature drop, and a powerful wave of killing intent surged towards him. Hiding his face from his colleagues behind his computer screen, Xuan Ji smirked, drawing attention to the small mole at the corner of his eye. "Oh, I guess you don't."

Sheng Lingyuan possessed remarkable self-discipline. He quickly reigned in his emotions. "What do you want?"

"A new round of negotiations."

"Speak."

Xuan Ji crossed his legs. "Look, senior. You can break out of meditation whenever you want without asking for my permission, which is quite inconvenient for my privacy. Meanwhile, as the sword's master, I can force you out without your consent, which is equally inconvenient for you. Why put ourselves through this? Can't we agree on a way to coexist peacefully?"

"For example?"

"Let's just both be polite and 'knock before entering,'" Xuan Ji

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3. This phrase comes from the popular Japanese manga and anime *Crayon Shin-chan*. The eponymous Shinnosuke Nohara, a mischievous kindergartener, often uses it when flirting with pretty women.

suggested. "You give me a signal when you end your meditation, and I promise to hold on to all of my questions until then. How does that sound?"

Despite being a smooth talker who might have achieved unrivalled success in the telefraud industry, the Demonic Revenant didn't like to waste time on superfluous words. Before Xuan Ji could bring up the "how" of his suggestion, a door materialised in his consciousness. It was a wooden door set within a stone frame—simple, yet elegant. The two clean panels bore only the natural grain of aged wood without any extra adornments. Where a door knocker might have been, there were instead two well-polished stones, seemingly intended for that purpose. As soon as he had that thought, Xuan Ji heard a soft "ding" reverberate from the stones—it was like the gentle chime of silver vessels.

Sheng Lingyuan said with brevity, "This is the signal."

With a crisp sound, the door panels shut: Sheng Lingyuan had severed their connection once more.

Xuan Ji had a fondness for the aesthetically pleasing. He was quite the avid collector, as evidenced by the figurines lining the cabinet in his study. He could never resist a shop selling antique furniture or old vinyl records. It was for the sake of these odds and ends that he bit the bullet and rented a two-bedroom flat. Since it was in a notoriously expensive area, he had been living hand-to-mouth ever since. The moment Xuan Ji laid eyes on the door, his heart skipped a beat. As though bewitched, he admired it for what felt like an eternity, disappointed that he couldn't snap a photo of something embedded in his conscious-

ness.

But the door's design didn't resemble the style of the Central Plains. It seemed to belong to a more obscure minority culture. Who exactly had this Demonic Revenant calling himself "Sheng" been in life? He certainly had impeccable taste. Suddenly, Xuan Ji's curiosity began to claw at him, eager to uncover Sheng Lingyuan's identity.

Just then, Ping Qianru interrupted his "art appreciation session". "Sir, have a look at this reply."

In the replies under their comment, someone had asked, "Did the symptoms start after the tenth of last month?"

"It's a newly registered account," Ping Qianru added. "The 10th of last month... wasn't that supposedly when the boy got infected?"

Now that he'd struck a temporary pact with the Demonic Revenant, Xuan Ji's privacy was once again secure, and his mind was free of distractions. He immediately refocused on the task at hand. "Ask them how they know."

Ping Qianru did as told, but no reply appeared in the thread. After a while, the other party sent a private message instead: "Where does your possessed relative live?"

Xuan Ji pulled up a map of Dongchuan and tapped on a specific area. Ping Qianru understood and replied, "In Beixiaoba."

The "relative" in question wasn't entirely fabricated; they'd borrowed the identity of a real person who lived near the infected boy. This man was a nasty thug who spent his time idling around and stealing pocket money from children. He'd had a run-in with the boy after he'd been infected by the butterfly.

Whether it was due to his rotund figure or his brazen attitude towards robbing children, the butterfly took notice—and gave him the honour of becoming its next host. He had since been quietly detained and quarantined by the ARB.

This time, the other party responded quickly.

"If he's from Beixiaoba, does he know this kid?"

Attached was a photo of the infected boy.

After several exchanges, the DRD team managed to trick the other party into revealing more details about their constructed identity. By now, Xuan Ji and his colleagues were confident they were dealing with an insider—someone who had a lot of information yet lurked in the shadows. Most likely, this was one of Ji Qingchen's accomplices.

At last, the insider messaged, "I know Master Ji. He's out of town at the moment, but he entrusted some items to me before he left. He must have foreseen that someone might come looking for help. I can try using them, but I can't guarantee it'll work, so don't get your hopes up."

Ping Qianru immediately typed, "We'll give you however much you want! Please, just help us save him."

Sensing hesitation on the other end, Ping Qianru added at Xuan Ji's suggestion, "We can give you half up front. Even if it doesn't work, you can keep the money. Just help us get in touch with Master Ji."

Their feigned gullibility and eagerness to throw money around elicited the exact response they'd been hoping for. The moment Ping Qianru mentioned upfront payment, the other party proposed a meeting time and place, their eagerness hardly

befitting a "great master".

"Let's go!" Xuan Ji urged.

As their plane pierced through the clouds, sunlight glinted off the ARB insignia on its tail—a sword wrapped in two intertwined vines. With a roar, it descended into Dongchuan Airport.

Due to suspected Mirage Butterfly infection, Dongchuan's field agents had all been quarantined, but the local ARB branch had managed to send a ride for the DRD team. Dongchuan was a wealthy city—even the public vehicles were of a higher class than those in the less developed Chiyuan region.

As his car started moving, Xuan Ji heard a faint "ding" in his mind, signalling that the Demonic Revenant in his sword had stirred. Suspecting the demon needed some fresh air, Xuan Ji quickly focused his thoughts in preparation.

Although he had no conscience to speak of, Sheng Lingyuan was actually quite polite. As long as his feud with someone did not escalate to bloodshed, he never withheld courtesy. After "knocking", he graciously waited for a moment, giving Xuan Ji time to collect himself. Then, a faint disturbance rippled through the latter's mind as another consciousness emerged from stillness.

Sheng Lingyuan hadn't come out to "get some air". He was an expert in meditation, and it hadn't been uncommon for him to stay in seclusion for days on end. He was not one to lose his patience so quickly—but from the moment they arrived in Dongchuan, his mind had been filled with inexplicable stray thoughts.

Had he... been here before? Try as he might, he couldn't re-

member.

Dongchuan was a sprawling metropolis. An intricate network of roads and bridges criss-crossed a concrete jungle of towering high-rises. Mid-autumn was a peak tourist season, and the streets were bustling with ceaseless streams of traffic. Waves of sightseers filled every thoroughfare to bursting.

Their car crawled along with the traffic in fits and starts. By the time they reached the city centre, dusk was setting in. A tour bus pulled alongside them, packed with middle-aged and elderly passengers wearing orange caps. Through the sword resting by the window, Sheng Lingyuan could hear them singing in chorus, their voices loud and unwavering: "Fearless and unyielding, we'll fight valiantly until we've eliminated the counter-revolutionaries!"

Sheng Lingyuan's eyes widened. *What kind of horrid place is this? How can it be this noisy?*

After inching along for about half an hour, the tour bus turned off at an intersection. The view opened up, and Sheng Lingyuan could finally see the outskirts of Dongchuan—distant mountains, dark as ink, with clouds standing motionless above them. Scattered lights were starting to glow at the mountain's base, climbing halfway up before merging with the misty twilight.

Xuan Ji's temple throbbed as a scene flickered through the Revenant's mind—a massive pear tree in bloom, its petals falling like snow. A few children with blurred faces leapt down from the tree, and a faint song with incomprehensible lyrics drifted over from somewhere in the distance...

The image vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Sheng Lingyuan noticed his straying thoughts and reigned them in.

Yet a melody lingered in Xuan Ji's mind, picking up right where the singing voices had left off.

Sheng Lingyuan was taken aback. "How do you know that song?"

"It sounds familiar." Xuan Ji scratched his face. "Maybe I heard it somewhere... Some stores like to play niche music... What song is it?"

Sheng Lingyuan was silent—Xuan Ji didn't know whether he'd forgotten or simply didn't want to answer. In the next moment, he could feel Sheng Lingyuan focus intently on the view outside, clear his thoughts—and begin looping the song endlessly in his own mind to torment him. By the time they arrived at the suspect's proposed rendezvous point, that exotic tune had divested Xuan Ji of all other thoughts.

The location of their sting operation was a small, desolate park. Luo Cuicui was sitting behind the wheel of a van, posing as the online poster, while Yang Chao reluctantly played the role of the "possessed relative". His protests having fallen on deaf ears, he sat in the back seat, bundled in layers of clothing like a rice dumpling. He'd even had some makeup applied to make him look battered, enhancing the "possessed" effect.

Xuan Ji was waiting in another car with Ping Qianru, who kept throwing hesitant glances in his direction, afraid to speak. Her department's peculiar new director was watching a replay of the day's news on his laptop with such intense focus, he might

as well have been taking a foreign language listening test. Occasionally, he would repeat a word or two under his breath, as if rehearsing for a role.

Ping Qianru had always hated attention. Since her third year of primary school, she hadn't even had the nerve to raise her hand in class. In sting operations like these, she usually played a technical support role. She just hoped that Xuan Ji wouldn't suddenly start improvising and drag her into the spotlight.

A crackle of static sounded from the radio. "Sir, someone's coming," Luo Cuicui reported.

Xuan Ji snapped his laptop shut. Thanks to his excellent night vision, he easily discerned a middle-aged man approaching from afar. He had a goatee on his pale, sickly face and slouched as he walked with faltering steps. As he crept towards their rendezvous point, his expression was both wary and fearful.

Just then, Sheng Lingyuan, who had been absorbed in studying modern language through the news videos, made a sound of surprise. "Hm... such a murderous aura."

"What do you mean?" Xuan Ji asked. "Has this guy killed someone?"

"No." Sheng Lingyuan scrutinised the man through the car window. "He's gotten it from elsewhere."

Luo Cuicui stepped out and exchanged a few words with the goateed man. His perpetually beaten down expression made him perfect for the role of a grieving family member. After sizing him up, Goatee nodded hesitantly and pointed at the car, indicating that he wanted to see the "possessed" person.

Luo Cuicui quickly obliged and opened the van's back door.

The dim lighting inside, coupled with Yang Chao's aggrieved demeanour, played perfectly into his "possessed" act. Yet, Xuan Ji noticed something strange—the moment the door opened, Goatee backed away without even glancing inside.

Wait...

Something was wrong. Somehow, Goatee had noticed the trap!

Xuan Ji made a snap decision. "Grab him!"

At his command, Luo Cuicui seized the man's arm. "Master, where are you going? Don't leave!"

Goatee pushed Luo Cuicui hard and turned to flee—only to trip over a rapidly creeping vine. He fell to the ground face-first, and before he could scramble to his feet, Xuan Ji was already blocking his path.

But out of nowhere, a massive tear materialised in the space behind the goateed man, and skeletal claws reached out from within. One seized Goatee by the throat while the others stretched towards Xuan Ji. He instantly raised his greatsword, which was now fiercely ablaze, to block. A grating sound rang out as the blade collided with bone. The moment they came into contact, a suffocating bloody aura surged forth from whatever evil creature the claws belonged to. It enveloped Xuan Ji and even blackened the flames on his blade!

In times of crisis, a person's true nature was revealed. In that perilous moment, the mild-mannered Xuan Ji and the amicable Sheng Lingyuan reached a rare understanding. In perfect unison, they ripped their peace treaty to shreds.

This is the perfect chance to rid the sword of that Demonic Reve-

nant!

Wouldn't it be convenient if this brat were to die here?

Xuan Ji plunged his greatsword into the mass of claws without hesitation. But immediately, he felt the hilt adhere itself to his hand, channelling the bloody aura right towards him. The tainted flames closed in—

The painstakingly forged alliance turned out to be no sturdier than plastic; a single crack, and it shattered.

Chapter 9

The damned sword cemented itself and its tens of kilograms of weight to Xuan Ji's hand, twisting his wrist into an unnatural angle and hindering his ability to exert force. Skeletal claws clamped onto the blade as the black flames advanced towards him. He was backed into a corner.

Wising up to his predicament, Xuan Ji changed his tune without hesitation. "Senior, I got ahead of myself there! I'm a bastard, a scoundrel! How about we join forces for now?"

Amicable and polite, Sheng Lingyuan replied, "Deal."

But once the "deal" was sealed, they both carried on as they had been—one trying to break the sword, the other aiming to drag his rival down with him. The tacit understanding between them was truly remarkable. They were a pair of kindred rogues that had finally met their match.

The nature and origin of the claws was a mystery, but based on the emanating bloodlust alone, they clearly belonged to a formidable opponent. Yet, neither Sheng Lingyuan nor Xuan Ji had been particularly worried. Between the two of them, one

wouldn't even blink when struck by lightning, and the other embodied *yang* energy powerful enough to ward off any evil. But even the fiercest of warriors could be felled by infighting. Cold black flames greedily ate their way up the sword, and under Sheng Lingyuan's directed guidance, they enveloped Xuan Ji from head to toe.

At that moment, an overwhelming gravitational pull arose from within the spatial tear, and it swallowed Goatee, Xuan Ji, and Sheng Lingyuan in a single gulp. A clatter rang out from the place where they had been standing. Xuan Ji's broken sports watch was all that remained.

Having witnessed the entire ordeal up close, Luo Cuicui stood stunned. From his perspective, it looked like Xuan Ji had offered himself up to the claws with the eagerness of an overindulgent father filling his dieting child's bowl with fatty pork belly. In the end, Xuan Ji's wish had been granted, and he was snatched away! Believing he'd just witnessed a true leader's resolute act of self-sacrifice, Luo Cuicui began to tear up. He rushed over to grab Xuan Ji's abandoned watch, his vines swaying in the wind. "Did he just give his life for us? What... What a hero!"

The "hero" Xuan Ji and his backstabbing sword were pulled into total darkness. With no ground beneath them, they plummeted straight down.

Beside them, Goatee's eyes had already rolled to the back of his head; he was completely unconscious. Xuan Ji grabbed the man's collar just as a massive pair of wings burst through the back of his own clothes. Dazzling flames danced across the wings, cleaving through the darkness.

Sheng Lingyuan was caught off guard, and his breath—assuming he even had any—stalled at the sight. The dazzling display burned his eyes, but he couldn't look away. Pain lanced through his head, as if a nail had been driven straight through his skull.

At that same moment, Xuan Ji's hearing cleared of Sheng Lingyuan's presence. Before he could feel relief, the sword in his grip turned searing hot—and a burning pain shot through his palm!

Xuan Ji had never been scared of heat. When cooking, he would regularly use his hand to test the temperature of his pan or cooking oil. He'd lived his whole life without ever knowing what it felt like to be scalded. For a moment, he didn't even realise he was being burned—he thought that his palm might have been pricked by something sharp.

It was as if the sword's very nature had changed; in an instant, it became as dense as a neutron star. Still glued to his hand, it dragged him downwards with overpowering force. Like a moth in a web, Xuan Ji flapped his wings frantically to no avail. All he could do as he continued his downward plunge was sling silent expletives at Sheng Lingyuan while folding his massive wings protectively around himself.

Like a flaming comet, Xuan Ji crashed loudly to the ground. Cushioned by his resilient wings, he bounced off the surface and rolled for several metres. His wings vanished, leaving his sweater and jacket a layer of backless rags. His shoulder blades felt as though they'd been shattered; the pain was so intense he could barely sit up straight. On the verge of blacking out, he

saw stars dance across his vision. When he finally managed to collect himself, he noticed that his hand had finally been freed. The sword lay at his feet, silent and still. Whether the Demonic Revenant was dead or unconscious, Xuan Ji couldn't tell.

Goatee lay motionless beside him. Xuan Ji quickly reached over and checked his breath—thankfully, he was alive. Xuan Ji sighed in relief, then began working his limbs to check if he'd broken anything. As he moved, he heard a crunch beneath his feet.

Huh? What had he stepped on?

Hesitantly, Xuan Ji snapped his fingers, and a small, round flame appeared at his fingertips. It illuminated the ground—

"Fuck!"

He unfolded his wings and leapt into the air.

The blazing flames on his feathers illuminated the area, revealing a vast space—littered with bones as far as the eye could see. Skeletons lay piled upon skeletons, blanketing the ground completely. Skulls big and small faced upwards as if they were watching him, the sole living being. Their empty sockets gleamed unnervingly in the firelight.

"Senior...? Hello? Are you still alive?" Goosebumps ran across Xuan Ji's skin and his throat went dry. He extended his hand to summon the greatsword from the ground. A cluster of bones came along for the ride, as though reluctant to part with the weapon.

Xuan Ji had learnt his lesson. Wary of Sheng Lingyuan's tricks, he avoided touching the hilt, keeping the sword hovering about ten centimetres away. "Say something. This place is giving

me the creeps... Hello?"

He was met with silence. Just as Xuan Ji was beginning to wonder if this place had terrible reception, he finally heard Sheng Lingyuan speak. "Stop shouting..."

His voice sounded distant, as though there were a wall between them.

Wait... I can't hear his thoughts anymore?

Sheng Lingyuan didn't respond, confirming Xuan Ji's suspicion. The door Sheng Lingyuan had constructed in their shared consciousness was gone as well.

But Sheng Lingyuan had no time to concern himself with these matters; he felt cold. The warm radiance from Xuan Ji's wings only intensified the chill, making him feel as though he had plunged into an icy abyss. He had no memory of those wings. Only an inexplicable sense of familiarity—and fear. He was actually *afraid* of those wings.

How strange. There was actually something he was afraid of?

Sheng Lingyuan genuinely couldn't remember. Surrounded by the scattered skulls' watchful gazes, he was gripped by a sharp headache. Long-buried memories scrambled to the surface of his mind—cries, wails, furious screams... and a shrill voice that demanded, "Are you there? Hey, you liar! Where are you?!"

It was a heart-wrenching cry. Sharp as thorns, the words lacerated his ears as though determined to tear him to pieces.

A hand reached over cautiously and wrapped long, slim fingers around the sword's hilt. They were neither frail like a child's, nor particularly sturdy like those of an adult. And yet the dry, warm palm radiated with life and energy. That gentle touch was

enough to pull Sheng Lingyuan back to reality. The shrieks and wails faded from his hearing, and in their place, he heard the little yao's voice. "Hey, I think that damned 'telepathic' link of ours is gone. Did you notice?"

So it is. Sheng Lingyuan replied with a soft hum.

He listened closely; sure enough, he couldn't hear Xuan Ji's thoughts anymore. What he found instead was a resurgence of the familiar craving for blood. A thought occurred to him. "Take care not to spill your blood on me."

Xuan Ji immediately understood. "You think that mind link was because of the blood? How does that even work?"

Sheng Lingyuan remained silent, gazing at the sea of bones below.

As it turned out, Xuan Ji was an expert at being a two-faced, conniving son of a bitch. Shamelessly, he offered, "Look, senior. You may have tried to stab me in the back, but I did the same thing. Let's just call it even, shall we? I forgive you."

"How truly magnanimous of you," Sheng Lingyuan said mockingly.

"Don't mention it." With a flap of his wings, Xuan Ji rose a little higher. "The reason for our, ah, bad blood is gone, and since we've found ourselves in this godforsaken who-knows-where... how about we work together?"

Sheng Lingyuan found the suggestion agreeable. After all, they were in perfect sync when it came to betrayal. Neither had a shred of guilt over severing ties at the first sign of trouble. It was a pleasant relationship wholly free of accountability.

"I know where we are," Sheng Lingyuan said. "Hold your

breath."

"Huh? Wha—"

"Shh—don't you hear it?"

Xuan Ji shuddered. When he held his breath as told, he could make out hushed murmurs. They were like the whisperings of a small group in the corner of a grand hall fit for thousands. At the same time, he noticed that Goatee, still lying amongst the bones, was beginning to stir.

"Looks like that bastard's getting up," Xuan Ji muttered. Sensing something amiss, he flew a little higher.

When the firelight illuminated Goatee's face, Xuan Ji could see that his eyes were still rolled back, and his head lolled to one side—he was clearly still unconscious. His legs were moving stiffly, like those of a marionette. He began to bounce in place, and Xuan Ji could hear a mischievous giggle eerily reminiscent of a child's. Beneath Goatee's loose clothing, something appeared to be moving.

Xuan Ji watched as the man walked forward with dance-like steps, his gestures becoming wilder and wilder. Then, something slipped out from his sleeve—a bone. As soon as it hit the ground, it began leaping about, as if throwing a tantrum. It quickly wriggled its way back into the leg of Goatee's trousers.

He was being controlled by bones under his clothing!

"What the hell..." Xuan Ji muttered.

"This place is the shamans' burial mound," Sheng Lingyuan said quietly.

Xuan Ji wasn't certain, but he thought he detected a trace of weariness in the Demonic Revenant's voice.

"What? This mass grave is *whose* burial mound?"

"The shamans. Have you never heard of them?" Sheng Lingyuan fell silent for a moment, then murmured softly, "So... after all these centuries, even their name has been forgotten."

Xuan Ji's brow creased slightly; he recalled seeing the words "Dongchuan Shaman Records" on the pile of bamboo slip fragments from his clan. That text had been where he'd found the description of Demonic Revenants.

Dongchuan... shamans... So, the shamans weren't just a sect, but a race that had existed at some point?

Perhaps the ancestors of a minority group?

"I'm not great with history... Who were these 'shamans' you mentioned?" Xuan Ji asked.

Sheng Lingyuan uttered something in a language Xuan Ji had never heard before.

"Huh?"

"That is the language of the shamans," Sheng Lingyuan said. "Repeat it for them."

Though hesitant, Xuan Ji did his best to mimic the odd, tongue-twisting sounds Sheng Lingyuan had made, replicating them for the bones below.

Sheng Lingyuan was surprised. "You didn't even ask what it meant? Suddenly, you think you can trust me?"

"Ah, I'm just the simple type," Xuan Ji replied shamelessly. "I don't like to overthink things."

Sheng Lingyuan scoffed at the blatant lie without even bothering to mock him.

After their brief "heart-to-heart", the two seemed to have de-

veloped a mutual understanding. It turned out that their natures and outlooks were actually quite similar. Both were ruthless when it came to taking the other down, but when there was no reason to do so, they were equally adept at fostering harmony. One would charm with sweet words, while the other would tactfully entertain with jokes. Now that they could no longer hear each other's thoughts, their bone of contention was gone, so neither was in a hurry to eliminate the other. Unless Sheng Lingyuan wanted to remain trapped in the sword and be tossed around like a toy spear by literal bones, he still needed Xuan Ji to devise a way to release him. He had no reason to harm his vessel's owner at the moment.

When it "heard" Xuan Ji's clumsy attempt at its language, the skeleton puppeteering Goatee slowly turned towards him. It acknowledged him with a "look", then resumed its shaky march forward.

"Follow," Sheng Lingyuan instructed.

"Where are we going?"

"Did you not ask me about the origin of the Human-Faced Butterfly?" Sheng Lingyuan's voice sounded faint. "This is where it comes from."

Xuan Ji's heart pounded in his chest, and he hurried to keep up. From the air, they followed the staggering figure for hundreds of metres, yet below them, the field of bones continued without end. Xuan Ji couldn't help but ask, "Just how many bodies are buried here?"

"Forty-one thousand six hundred and thirty-six," replied Sheng Lingyuan.

"Huh?" Xuan Ji blurted out after a long pause. "No, really. With all these limbs lying about, how could you know? Did you count the skulls or something?"

"Of course I know," Sheng Lingyuan replied placidly. "I killed them myself."

If a person said, "I killed someone," they were probably a murderer. If they claimed, "I killed thirty-six people," they'd be prime material for a true crime documentary. However, if someone declared, "I killed forty-one thousand six hundred and thirty-six people"... Well, they were most likely a gaming addict with an aversion to touching grass.

Xuan Ji responded with a bewildered "ah" before straying off topic. "You've forgotten who you are, but you remember such a big number?" Had this Demonic Revenant been an accountant in life?

Sheng Lingyuan ignored him.

"Or did you just remember something?" Xuan Ji pressed.

After a pause, he heard a vague hum from the other man.

Xuan Ji was immediately overcome with regret. He'd missed his chance!

Back when Xuan Ji had been able to use the Demonic Revenant's mind like a search engine, the latter couldn't even remember his own name. But now that their connection had dropped, this bastard was telling him his memory was returning?! Xuan Ji felt like a fool who'd bought in right before a market crash. How could his luck be *this* bad?

Although... If the demon's memory was just beginning to return, his mind must have been like paste. Perhaps he could take

advantage of this opportunity and gain a bit of leverage?

"Erm... Your Majesty," Xuan Ji prodded slyly, "did the headcount have to be quite so accurate when you were razing their settlements? No room in your army for anyone bad at maths, I guess. Were those shamans your enemies?"

"No." Sheng Lingyuan, as expected, was lost in thought and failed to notice the little yao's subtle probing. He didn't correct Xuan Ji for addressing him as "Your Majesty". "The shamans had always been our allies because they considered themselves human... Look at the shape of their bones. They're identical to human remains."

This revelation struck Xuan Ji like a bolt of lightning. His pupils shrank as a myriad of thoughts raced through his mind.

What was that supposed to mean? *The shamans considered themselves human, so they were allies?* Weren't wars fought *between* humans? If not humans, what were they fighting? Dogs?

No—there was indeed *one* war that hadn't been fought between humans: the Great Upheaval of the Nine Provinces three thousand years ago!

It had been a war waged by King Ping of Great Qi, whose regal name was "Jun". According to the history books, certain southwestern minorities had been allowed to grow in power during his reign. In those days, conflicts had abounded between the Central Plains and those minorities on the frontiers. King Ping himself had been an avid war enthusiast. Since battle royale and MOBA games hadn't been available at the time, he decided on impulse to lead an expedition personally, together with his two adult sons.

The grand army swept towards the Crimson Abyss, launching the first Battle of the Abyss—only to be thoroughly decimated. The battle claimed the lives of a king, two princes, and countless nobles and elite officials, putting an end to the dynasty in one fell swoop. Maps were burnt, the king's jade disc was shattered, the queen fled, and the capital fell. With no central authority, every region and tribe was forced to govern itself, and the lands were plunged into turmoil for over twenty years.

This period was known as the "Era of Great Upheaval".

The identity of those so-called "southwestern minorities" had always been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Numerous theories had been put forward, but each one was riddled with flaws. Three millennia was so long ago that most facts could no longer be verified. The surviving evidence from that era, gathered from throughout the country, couldn't even fill a single museum wing. That was because most of the relevant artefacts had, in fact, been sealed away by the ARB. In the Historical Restoration Department's archives, an entire collection of relics from the Great Upheaval was preserved—each item imbued with metanatural energy.

The truth was that these "southwestern minorities" hadn't belonged to any known ethnic groups—they hadn't even been human. They were a separate, non-human race that had once coexisted with humans and divided rule. The Crimson Abyss had marked the boundary between them.

In 1981, the ARB managed to dispel a protective formation on the outskirts of the Crimson Canyon. Inside, they discovered a cave housing the skeleton of an enormous bird weighing over

three hundred kilograms. Near the entrance to the cave stood a stone stele inscribed with the words: "Tomb Guardian, Yan Ming of the bifang clan". Residual lightning-fire energy was found on the stele. After careful examination, the ARB determined that the energy traces on the stele matched those on the skeletal remains. This finding indicated that the bird itself had carved the text.

In other words, the bones belonged to an extraordinarily intelligent species with a sophisticated culture—a species that closely resembled the firebird "bifang" from mythology. The Historical Restoration Department suggested that these non-human species might have been the original inspiration for the yao known in folklore today.

The Great Upheaval had been the only cataclysm in recorded history triggered by a war between humans and non-humans. And it had been brought to an end by King Ping's successor: Emperor Wu, Sheng Xiao.

Emperor Wu of Great Qi was said to have been the posthumous son of King Ping, born the same year the first Battle of the Abyss began. From the day of his birth, he had known no peace—always fleeing or wandering, forced to live off scraps during a time of war. He had ultimately been the one to unify the human factions, single-handedly subdue the rampaging demons, slay the King of the Yao, erect the boundary stele, and establish the Bureau of Peace. By wielding violence to quell violence, he earned eternal renown.

It was only in the later years of his rule, after the nation had been restored, that Emperor Wu revealed his cold-blooded side.

His ruthlessness eventually progressed into utter madness. In the end, he leapt to his death in the Crimson Abyss, leaving behind no remains. The tomb of Emperor Wu that existed today was merely an empty symbol.

The Demonic Revenant had lived during the Great Upheaval, and his remains had been resting in the Crimson Canyon. He was of the human race, he bore the royal surname, and he didn't blink at being addressed as "Your Majesty"...

Could he... Could he possibly be...

Xuan Ji shuddered. No, wait—being called "Your Majesty" couldn't have been *that* unusual. During the Great Upheaval, countless races had been wiped out, leaving their customs lost to time. Besides, among humanity's many allies, there were some who admired the culture of the Central Plains. They'd adopted human customs, including the tradition of calling leaders "Your Majesty". It was also possible that some ancient, unsophisticated tribes had worshipped dark spirits and demons. If they summoned one to help them fight against their enemies, they might have reverently addressed it as "Your Majesty".

In any case, it couldn't have been *him*! Otherwise, the irony would have been outrageous: the emperor who had saved humanity from disaster had not, himself, been *human*—how would that even make sense?

But in the face of demons, even the gods were but sacrifices. Perhaps the only way to subdue a legion of demons was with an even fiercer demon?

Xuan Ji dismissed these thoughts and composed himself. As he clutched the greatsword, he could feel threads of icy energy

emanating from the cold steel. He recalled the phrase Sheng Lingyuan had taught him in the shamanic language. Though Xuan Ji couldn't understand its meaning, the tone in which the demon spoke had been incredibly gentle. It sounded like that of an old friend visiting from afar, bending down to ask a child at the door, "Would you take me to see your elders?"

"So who were the shamans?"

"The shamans resided in Dongchuan for generations. They worshipped the mountains and the land, believing that spirits resided in all beings. Whether they were blessed by bountiful harvests or beset by calamities, they never abandoned their land, believing themselves akin to plants. To part from their land would have meant severing their roots, inviting misfortune." Sheng Lingyuan had given up on his awkward attempts at modern speech and switched back to his native dialect. His words were imbued with the frost of time—distant, solemn, and steeped with age. "The shamans excelled in the art of spellcraft. You asked about the origin of the Human-Faced Butterfly, did you not? It isn't a living creature; it is a spell created by the shamans' foremost sages using secret arts. Its earliest uses were in funerals."

After hearing so much of it recently, Xuan Ji was finding the ancient dialect less laborious to parse. He asked, "Funerals?"

"Yes. The shamans believed that the Human-Faced Butterfly could bridge the realms of life and death. When a person departed abruptly, their family were often left heartbroken, feeling they still held words left unsaid. They would ask the tribe's Grand Sage—the one who oversaw the annual ceremonies—to

perform a ritual at their home. The Grand Sage would place the Human-Faced Butterfly in the deceased's mouth, and within a day, the departed would open his eyes. He would sit, walk, and even speak as if he were alive, allowing him to meet with those who needed to see him, to speak the words left unspoken. Once all was brought to closure, the Grand Sage would retrieve the butterfly and lay the departed to rest."

Xuan Ji was taken aback. "This whole time, we thought it was just a parasite. I didn't realise it was quite so... mystical?"

"It *is* just a parasite," Sheng Lingyuan replied indifferently. "Since ancient times, funerals and mourning rites have been the delusions of the living. The end of a life is like the snuffing of a flame—none of that nonsense about eternity. What I described was merely a ritual. Even the shamans themselves understood this. When disputes arose over a deceased's inheritance, they resolved them through their leaders, rather than 'waking' the dead to ask questions."

Xuan Ji was speechless. His Majesty, the Demonic Revenant, was unwavering as ever in his atheism.

"Dongchuan... Dongchuan was a blessed land. Its soil was fertile, its resources abundant, and its spiritual energy vibrant. The climate shifted rapidly—sometimes sun, rain, snow, and clouds would appear in succession. All four seasons could be experienced in a single day. You could enjoy the beauty of autumn moonlight on spring flowers or winter snow reflected in a lotus pond. Even the water tasted sweeter there. In turn, the land produced rare treasures that could not be found elsewhere."

As they followed the stumbling man, Xuan Ji found that the

more he listened to Sheng Lingyuan, the more questions he had. Though the Revenant spoke impassively, the words he used were carefully chosen and seemed to be tinged with nostalgia. It sounded almost as if... as if he were describing his own homeland.

"It is of no wonder that others coveted what the shamans had. Since the dawn of time, every conflict among the living has been, at its root, about the gifts borne from the earth."

"Did they use the butterflies to protect themselves too?" Xuan Ji asked. "Besides being able to 'revive' the dead, the butterflies can also infect living people, right? Did the shamans have some sort of spiritual power that allowed them to control the butterflies? Like the way poison cultivators could control the insects they raised?"

Sheng Lingyuan scoffed at the question. "The shamans' lineage ran deep, their spells vast and intricate. The Human-Faced Butterfly was but a trifle—not something they would have relied on for protection."

Xuan Ji's heart raced. If the Human-Faced Butterfly that had turned the entire ARB on its head was a "trifle", just what kind of power had the *true* shamanic spells held?

"When the yao army crossed the Crimson Abyss, humanity lay scattered like seedlings in the fields. They were helplessly harvested, powerless to resist, and verging on annihilation under the yao's wrath. It was the shamans to whom they owed their eventual resurgence. The shamans had always lived in seclusion, but in humanity's most desperate hour, they relinquished arcane spells that were never meant to be shared. They saw themselves

as part of humankind—and duty-bound to aid them."

"By that logic," Xuan Ji asked curiously, "shouldn't the shamans have been celebrated as heroes? Even if literacy was rare in your time, and there weren't many written records, there must have been legends passed down through word-of-mouth, right? How did they just vanish without leaving a trace?"

"Such childish thinking... Little yao, did you truly grow up with no exposure to sectarianism?" Sheng Lingyuan chuckled, then lamented, "I suppose the world is different now. In these times, you live in an intermixed society with no bias between clans."

"Huh?"

"The shamans thought themselves human. But humans did not see them as kin."

Xuan Ji froze. "You mean..."

"The Human-Faced Butterfly... or as you call it, the 'Mirage Butterfly'. Even now, people recoil in horror at the mention of it, do they not? In the past, it was but one small aspect of the shamans' capabilities. Let me ask you this: even if you had fought by the shamans' side and weathered calamity together, would you believe them to have truly shared everything with you? Would you believe that the 'humans' who wielded such power could have no ambitions or ulterior motives? That they were genuinely content remaining in seclusion in one small corner of Dongchuan, detached from the rest of the world?"

Catching on to his implication, Xuan Ji asked in disbelief, "Wait, are you saying the shamans didn't die out because of war... but because they were betrayed by their allies?"

"That's right," Sheng Lingyuan replied with detachment. "Therefore you should be wary, now that you are trapped here."

Xuan Ji's mind leapt in another direction. "If that's the case, then you—"

He didn't have the chance to ask what Sheng Lingyuan's role in the war had been, as their conversation was interrupted by a shriek from below.

There couldn't have been a worse time for Goatee to regain consciousness. As soon as he opened his eyes, he found himself "sleepwalking" in a horrible nightmare, his clothes stuffed with bouncing bones. The man nearly died of fright on the spot. He sprang up in panic, sobbing as he frantically attempted to kick away the bones. Within moments, a wet patch formed at his groin.

"Ugh, that stinks..." Xuan Ji wrinkled his nose in disgust. "But actually, is it just me or is our buddy over there looking a little dehydrated?"

"Best worry about yourself first," Sheng Lingyuan warned.

From beneath them, Xuan Ji heard a series of soft clacking sounds that gradually grew louder. Looking down, he saw all the bones on the ground shaking, as though they'd been "awoken" by the stench of urine. The skulls bounced up and down, each one slowly turning to face Xuan Ji with open jaws.

"Uh... Now I'm suddenly the centre of attention? That's embarrassing. What should I do?" Xuan Ji said. "Wait, I was just kidding! Are you really pulling out glow sticks for me?!"

From the skulls' mouths drifted countless tiny points of light, and a soft, entrancing glimmer rose over the bone mound like a

layer of mist. It gave the skeletons a strangely gentle appearance, as though they were smiling.

—The lights were a myriad of Mirage Butterflies, lifting their wings against the breeze.

"Shit!" Xuan Ji swiftly dove down. The flames flaring from his wings repelled the terrifying butterflies in his path. Reluctant to touch the smelly Goatee directly, he lifted him up with the tip of his greatsword.

Sheng Lingyuan was livid. *This brat must have a death wish!*

Despite their weakness in the face of fire, the butterflies swarmed Xuan Ji in droves, their eerie glow illuminating the mass grave with artificial day. He fled upwards, only to hit the ceiling barely twenty metres above!

Xuan Ji didn't know if this godforsaken place was a tunnel or a cave, but there was no sign of an exit. Surrounded on all sides by the butterflies, he felt goosebumps blanket his skin. That was when he glimpsed a patch of darkness—it appeared to be a cavern, shadowed from the light. The butterflies seemed to be avoiding it.

Without thinking twice, Xuan Ji dove headfirst towards the darkness with Goatee still hanging off his sword, unconscious once more.

"Allow me."

As Huang Zhiheng reached for the doorknob, Xiao Zheng, who had been walking a step behind, quickly caught up. Xiao Zheng was wearing a plain, thick-banded ring etched on the inside with intricate inscriptions. As soon as he touched the door-

knob, a sharp white light flashed over the engravings, and the door opened with a creak. Expression calm, Xiao Zheng stepped through, holding the door for his boss. "Best not to touch anything here," he said under his breath. "The Penglai Conference isn't entirely safe."

Huang Zhiheng's expression darkened, but he remained composed. He gave Xiao Zheng a reassuring pat on the shoulder and followed him into the conference centre of an old hotel. All three floors had been booked, and a standing sign at the entrance read, "Penglai Culture and Arts Symposium".

The moment Huang Zhiheng, Xiao Zheng, and the handful of accompanying field agents crossed the threshold, the door shut loudly behind them. All outside sounds ceased as though the group had plunged into water. Xiao Zheng took the lead while the field agents cautiously encircled Huang Zhiheng, the only non-metahuman among them. On their anomalous energy detectors, warning lights flashed ominously.

Xiao Zheng abruptly stopped, his gaze fixed on a stone sculpture at the foot of the stairs. It was one of the conference centre's decorations, carved to resemble a graceful goddess with flowing clothes. But the statue was made of cheap stone with a faint greenish hue, and its delicate face was marred by grotesque fangs. A chunk of its face had even been chipped off. Xiao Zheng wondered just whom it was meant to scare.

As they approached, the statue creaked into motion, turning halfway to face them. It slid towards them as though possessed, closing the distance in an instant. One of the field agents near Huang Zhiheng stepped forward to block its path and found

himself standing nose-to-nose with the eerie, disfigured goddess.

Xiao Zheng's brow twitched. He suspected that this was a scare tactic—a veiled threat meant to intimidate Huang Zhiheng, the only ordinary human present.

Though Huang Zhiheng wasn't a metahuman who could manifest fire or summon water, he hadn't earned his position by being ordinary. His expression was steady as he rested a hand on the field agent's shoulder and gave the statue a courteous nod. "Might you be the legendary 'Madam Jade'?"

The statue leant back, then opened its mouth to speak. "Mr Huang, I've heard much about you. And Captain... Ah no, I suppose you're a director now, aren't you? Still as sharp as ever, Mr Xiao."

Xiao Zheng responded with only a curt nod.

"Please follow me." The statue gave Huang Zhiheng a pointed look, then shuffled towards the elevator. "Everyone else has already arrived."

The Anomaly Regulation Bureau was the sole official body responsible for managing metahumans—but that didn't mean every metahuman was under its jurisdiction. Given the hereditary nature of metanatural abilities, the meta-community had many long-standing clans and sects. They all had their own closely guarded secrets, unique skills, and deeply-rooted traditions. The protégés of these unofficial schools were honed into masters of exceptional prowess. They looked down on the so-called "officials" and didn't take kindly to their oversight.

However, the authorities saw such individuals as a potential destabilising force within society and deemed it necessary to

monitor them. Ultimately, both sides reached a compromise and agreed to form the "Penglai Conference", a self-regulating body of metahuman organisations from across the country. The Conference was led by the most prominent figures from each major faction, and a seat was always reserved for the ARB.

The statue led the ARB representatives into a large conference room on the first floor, which looked like it hadn't been renovated since the previous century. The white walls were decorated with framed maps, and two rows of seats were arranged around a cheap, reddish-brown table set with little more than thermos flasks and enamel mugs. The men and women in attendance sat imposingly on either side. Their receding hairlines and downturned mouths underscored the wisdom that was practically oozing from the large bellies their trousers could barely contain.

As soon as Xiao Zheng's group entered, these big shots all turned their heads in unison and cast inscrutable glances at the ARB's chief director.

Although the Bureau had strict secrecy protocols, truth was difficult to suppress among metahumans. News of the Mirage Butterfly scandal spread as though it had wings of its own, sending shockwaves throughout the community. As secrets leaked out, inquiries poured in. The Penglai faction leaders reached a unilateral consensus—and urgently convened the Conference for the sole purpose of demanding an explanation from the ARB.

The room was filled, save for the two empty seats clearly reserved for them. Xiao Zheng took a quick note of the seating

arrangements and their implications. As the official body, the Bureau had always held the leading seat at the Conference. Although the former chief director had usually ceded that seat to an older representative voluntarily, he still took the neighbouring one for himself. However, the current seating arrangement was very different. Even though the chair designated for Huang Zhiheng was not at the very end, it was effectively miles away from the head of the table.

What was the meaning of this?

Were ordinary people inferior here?

Xiao Zheng scowled, ready to erupt on the spot. Since when were they treated with such open disdain? As though anticipating his reaction, however, Huang Zhiheng held him back and subtly shook his head. Otherwise unfazed, Huang Zhiheng greeted the elderly woman at the head of the table and led Xiao Zheng to the vacant seats, appearing entirely oblivious to the seating slight.

The head seat was occupied by a woman with greying hair who appeared to be in her sixties. She was petite, wore light makeup, and sported a delicate silk scarf tied askew around her neck. She spoke and moved with an air of refined grace, evoking the demeanour of an old-fashioned noblewoman.

"Young Huang, is it?" she began unhurriedly. "This old woman shouldn't need to introduce herself, should she?"

Huang Zhiheng returned the greeting. "Madam Jade."

Madam Jade, the host of the Penglai Conference, lived in seclusion in the country's northeastern region. She was such a renowned elder that everyone addressed her exclusively by her

title; no one even remembered her full name anymore. Though she looked only a few years older than Huang Zhiheng, she was said to be over three hundred years old. Some even claimed that she was nearly a thousand—and that she had once served in the legendary Bureau of Peace. Despite addressing Huang Zhiheng by his surname rather than his title, she spoke so amicably that he didn't take offence. After all, even the former chief director had always given up his seat for her.

Madam Jade's words were polite but distant when she addressed Huang Zhiheng. However, when she spoke to Xiao Zheng, her tone softened considerably, as though she were talking to one of her own children. "Young Xiao, you've become even more reserved since I last saw you. Seeing you young folks grow up, one generation surpassing the last, just as the rear waves of the Yangtze River drive on those ahead—well, it puts my mind at ease."

Xiao Zheng acknowledged her with a polite nod, but he didn't take her words to heart. Madam Jade had seen countless "waves" roll in and out; there were only so many she could care about.

Sure enough, after a brief exchange of pleasantries, Madam Jade's tone hardened. "We're all busy people, so let's get to the matter at hand, shall we? Young Xiao, I read your report. Tell me—do you truly intend to handle such a serious situation with only an internal investigation? Settle it 'in-house', I suppose? Don't you think the community deserves an explanation?"

Madam Jade addressed only Xiao Zheng, ignoring the chief director's presence entirely. Her behaviour underscored the

palpable divide between metahumans and ordinary people—a divide the ARB, as an official organisation, avoided acknowledging for the sake of tact. However, these self-declared masters had no such restraint. They acted as if they hadn't been born of common flesh and blood but hailed from a lineage of semi-immortals.

As Xiao Zheng had come from an ordinary family, Madam Jade's disregard for Huang Zhiheng didn't sit well with him. True to his blunt, stubborn nature, he decided to throw courtesy out the window. Ignoring Madam Jade, he turned to Huang Zhiheng. "Apologies, sir. It's my fault for not being clear enough in my report."

Huang Zhiheng smiled, unfazed. "It's fine. That's exactly why we're here today—to clarify the situation."

Having refined her patience to an art, Madam Jade showed no reaction to being disregarded by her junior. Her amicable expression remained perfectly unruffled as she accepted a printed document from the person beside her and donned her reading glasses. "Your Bureau's statement claims, 'Given that the implanted Mirage Butterfly poses no further risk, and in order to minimise public panic and maintain social stability, we have determined that the best course of action is to handle the matter discreetly.' Now, how can you be so sure the butterfly infection won't spread? I have heard that more than half of your Dongchuan branch field staff have been absent from their duties of late."

Xiao Zheng replied, "We've outlined the reasons—"

"You believe the Mirage Butterfly isn't contagious and that this incident is an isolated mutation. Yes, I read that part." Mad-

am Jade cut him off. "But all of this is speculation. Even if your reasoning is sound, and only the mutated butterfly can infect others, how can you be certain there isn't a second mutant?"

At that moment, Xiao Zheng's phone vibrated. He glanced down at where it lay on the table and saw the name "Luo Cuicui" flash across the screen. He declined the call and said without missing a beat, "We fully understand your concerns, which is why we immediately dispatched personnel to Dongchuan. They're racing against the clock to investigate the source of the mutated butterfly. I believe we'll be able to provide a conclusive response very—"

Again, Madam Jade gently interrupted. "That means you don't know for sure yet either."

Xiao Zheng's brow furrowed.

Madam Jade's eyes crinkled in a smile. "The Mirage Butterfly might not be a living fossil, but it's close enough. With so many ancient texts lost, who today would dare claim they truly understand it? I certainly wouldn't. But even if your Bureau is full of talented experts who can guarantee that this mutation was just a fluke and that there isn't a second one—what does that have to do with us requesting a third-party investigation into the ARB? From the former chief director down, your Bureau has been harbouring layers upon layers of corruption. Falsifying death tolls using dangerous public assets... the evidence is irrefutable. Do we not deserve an explanation?"

Huang Zhiheng interjected, "Madam Jade, I'm not sure where these rumours of 'irrefutable evidence' against the former chief director originated, but there aren't grounds for a convic-

tion. We only have the suspect Bi Chunsheng's one-sided accusation. She even—"

"As long as *you* call it 'one-sided', then we'll just have to take your word for it, huh?" grumbled an old man to Madam Jade's left. Clad in a black tunic suit, the man spoke quickly in a grating voice. "Heh, who knows what you're up to behind closed doors? When the time comes, you could just find a cute little scapegoat from who-knows-where, pin all the blame on him, and we'd be none the wiser. Isn't that right, Young Wang?"

Huang Zhiheng responded with resignation. "You must be Master Yuede, I presume? I am surnamed *Huang*. You see, we've assigned a highly competent staff member to lead this internal investigation. He was indispensable in stopping the Dark Descent ritual and personally faced off against the Demonic Revenant summoned by the suspect for several hours. He has a clean record and wasn't originally part of the Bureau, so he has no vested interests with the people involved—"

"Mr Huang," Madam Jade said slowly, "if you're willing to let a newcomer with a 'clean record' investigate, then why not allow an even more impartial third party to do it? What's the difference?"

Master Yuede echoed her sentiment. "Clean record or not, he's still on the Bureau's payroll, right? And if he *does* find something fishy, don't the results still have to go through the approval of your chair people? Besides, how clean can he really be? I heard this one got in through the back channels to begin with. He'd just passed his exam when he somehow got put in the position of department head. Impressive! Scored two hundred and

fifty on a one hundred-point test, did he? How could you be sure he wouldn't abuse his position, hmm?"

"Of course, we have regulation—"

"That's what we're here to discuss—regulation!" Master Yuede slammed the table. "You're the ones who wanted to establish the Penglai Conference. Fine, here we are. You laid down all sorts of rules for us, assigned people to monitor us, and sure, we understood, we cooperated with the government. But now that something's gone wrong on *your* end, there's suddenly an issue with *regulation*? You all sit safe and comfortable in your Yong'an offices, while this butterfly business is happening right in *our* backyard!"

The Penglai bigwigs all had their own territories. Madam Jade held influence in the northeast, while Master Yuede held sway over the southeast. The boy who had been infected by the butterfly resided in Master Yuede's domain.

Master Yuede was said to have been born in the twilight of the Qing Dynasty. Burning with ambition and aggressive as a fighting dog, he supposedly valued honour above even his own life. He had countless disciples, and Dongchuan's ARB branch couldn't do anything without respecting his authority. Having spoken to this point, he raised his already loud voice and declared, "Each of our factions should establish a monitoring team in the Bureau headquarters to ensure mutual supervision!"

Huang Zhiheng gave him a troubled smile. "Government departments can't just spring into existence on my word..."

"Fine—then we'll leave each other be. Let's keep to our own waters, and whatever happens under our jurisdiction, your Bu-

reau better not stick its nose in."

Chaotic voices erupted from all around the conference table. Huang Zhiheng made several attempts to interject but was thoroughly ignored. When the former chief director had been at the helm, the Bureau managed to maintain a semblance of order. But now that he was gone, one incident after another was cropping up at the Bureau. Xiao Zheng was young, and Huang Zhiheng wasn't a metahuman, so these arrogant Penglai Conference veterans had decided they could dismiss the ARB altogether.

Xiao Zheng sighed just as his phone alerted him of another incoming call; it was Luo Cuicui again. Tough and pragmatic, Xiao Zheng rarely entertained the word "hopefully". But before answering the call, he found himself thinking, *Hopefully, the DRD has some good news.*

"Mr Xiao, I have something to report..." Between sobs, Luo Cuicui relayed the "good news" Xiao Zheng had been hoping for. "Our boss died a hero's death! He was dragged through a portal by skeleton claws and vanished!"

When it rains, it pours. Xiao Zheng nearly died right then and there.

Sniffling, Luo Cuicui asked, "Sir, when can I transfer to a safer post?"

Xuan Ji's nose was suddenly itchy, as though someone were cursing him, and he turned his head to sneeze.

Seeing him charge headlong towards the cavern, Sheng Lingyuan quickly called after him. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"Can't you see all these butterflies chasing me? Damn... That

makes me sound like such a loser."

"Why run from the butterflies?" Sheng Lingyuan asked indifferently. "Your nature is fire; they cannot infect you."

"But they can infect *this* guy!" Xuan Ji dove into the cavern, and his wings dissolved into a cloud of light the moment his feet hit the ground. Without batting an eye, he flung Goatee to the ground. "Hello, senior? Did you miss the fact that we've got a living, breathing person here? He's still warm—and reeking!"

"This man is a vile swindler. What should it matter to you whether he lives or dies?" Sheng Lingyuan's tone abruptly became tense. "Go no further!"

Xuan Ji felt a prick of suspicion—this was the first time Sheng Lingyuan had ever spoken with such urgency, and there was an uncharacteristic tremble in his voice.

"Senior, just listen to yourself," he said, deliberately drawing out his words, "You have no political acumen at all! I'm a registered official, you know. What sort of man would I be if I let a civilian wander into a swarm of dangerous parasites?"

"Stop right there!" Sheng Lingyuan barked, his voice laced with a faint trace of anger.

Xuan Ji blinked. "What's the matter, senior? Could it be that you happen to know what's in this cave?"

Sheng Lingyuan dodged the question. "If you are this wary of the butterflies, you should be even more wary of a place where they would not venture. Leave. I will find a way to get you out of here."

"You'll find a way? Does that mean you *know* the way?"

"To my knowledge, this burial mound houses an altar with

a mechanism that unlocks a passage to the surface." As he addressed Xuan Ji, Sheng Lingyuan's voice softened into its usual calm cadence. "I had intended for that skeleton to lead us there, but this man ruined that plan midway. The altar must not be far. Listen to me—take him and leave here. You carry fire within your body. The butterflies would be hard-pressed to approach you."

His voice was low and held an indistinct, seductive quality. It felt as if it were whispering directly into Xuan Ji's ear—and it didn't sound like anything good. Xuan Ji's ears prickled, and his gaze became momentarily unfocused. He finally understood why Bi Chunsheng, even in her madness, had nearly burst into tears just from hearing the Revenant say, "Who wronged you?" This man wielded a strange, beguiling power. He wove his words into a fine, delicate net that ensnared his targets, giving them the illusion that they had his undivided love and attention. It made them feel as if they could finally unburden themselves of their grievances, frustrations, and sadness.

Without realising it, Xuan Ji had stopped walking.

Though Sheng Lingyuan's voice was as warm as a spring breeze, his heart remained icy. He thought to himself, "This little yao is young, but he has remarkable talent. Spiritual beings endowed by the elements are proud and disdainful of intermingling with outsiders. They have difficulty bearing offspring, so fledglings are well-guarded by their kin, kept far from the difficulties of human society. If he calls himself a patriarch at his age, his clan must have fallen into disarray. He must have had no one to care for him even in childhood."

If this little yao was so starved for affection, Sheng Lingyuan would indulge him. Softly, he said, "Even the butterflies dare not advance further. Danger is rife, yet you bring along a mere mortal. Do you believe yourself so capable?" He sighed, adding a tender note to his soothing tone. "Such recklessness. How could your elders let you out into the world like this? Their worry must know no bounds."

Under his coaxing words, Xuan Ji found himself softening. After a moment's hesitation, he grabbed Goatee by the collar and detached him from the greatsword. As he dragged him along, he murmured, almost sulkily, "Fine..."

As if in a trance, he turned back and retraced his steps.

The cavern's entrance was now bright as day. Butterflies clustered at the mouth but flew no further. They fluttered tentatively, as though testing their limits. But Xuan Ji seemed oblivious to these dangerous insects as he walked, one step after another, into their encircling horde.

"Do as I say," Sheng Lingyuan coaxed. "You will come to no harm."

The phosphorescent glow from the butterflies illuminated Xuan Ji's face, casting light on his unfocused gaze.

Sheng Lingyuan's lips silently curled into a smile. "Good..."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a blaze erupted from the greatsword. The sharp light stung Sheng Lingyuan's eyes, making him wince as the sword cut an arc towards the mouth of the cavern. Thousands of butterflies were scorched into a flickering pyre of sparks, filling the air with a charred odour.

"Senior, when have you ever kept your word?" Xuan Ji chuckled. After roasting the butterflies, he strode deeper into the cavern. "I won't come to harm, you say? You mean I won't come to harm *this time*?"

Sheng Lingyuan didn't respond.

"Adding up the time you've spent above and below ground, I'm guessing you're about—oh, a few thousand years old? And yet your moral refinement is so lacking. Lying through your teeth without a hint of shame." Xuan Ji shook his head and tapped the tip of his sword against the ground. "Are you blushing *now*?"

The greatsword struck the hard stone with a resonant clang. The echo indicated a vast, open space ahead.

With Goatee in one hand and the sword in the other, Xuan Ji carried his two heavy burdens effortlessly, striding towards the echo with light steps. Along the way, he continued to ramble. "Since you're here, let me give you some lessons on our contemporary values. These days, we believe in equality and justice. Given your current moral standards, justice might be a stretch, so let's talk about equality instead. What's equality, you ask? Well, it means that anything that lives and breathes has equal rights in our society—human or metahuman, good or bad. If someone's scheming to rob or kill someone else, my job is to hand them over to the police. Until then, I'm going to protect them all the same."

The Demonic Revenant had gone completely quiet, probably from rage.

"All that 'emperors and nobles' nonsense you ancient people

espouse is completely outdated now, you understand? Your political views are a relic of the past, and my..." Xuan Ji's relentless tirade came to an abrupt stop as he took in the scene before him. "My... Oh my good lord..."

He had followed the narrow path into a spacious chamber that surrounded a stagnant pool. By some miracle, the water hadn't dried up. Strange vines clung to the cavern walls, each dotted with small, white flower buds that emit a faint glow—resembling light bulbs.

As Xuan Ji stepped inside, the eerie buds welcomed him by blooming in unison, bathing the cavern in light. A soft, milky glow drifted down from above, warmer than a lover's gaze. Xuan Ji instinctively held his breath and covered Goatee's face, wary that the pollen from the unknown plants might be toxic.

With both hands occupied, he had no choice but to drop the greatsword to the ground. The sound of metal colliding with stone sent ripples across the pool's surface. All at once, the flowers flushed crimson, then withered, dissolving into a liquid that trickled down the walls like blood. From all directions, it flowed towards the sword...

Chapter 10

Xuan Ji had roamed far and wide—had toured countless botanical gardens, yet never before had he come across a plant so bizarre, it would erupt into a stream of blood at the slightest provocation. This situation had reached a point of no return.

Ever since his lifebound sword had "run away from home", it had met with one mishap after another. Being "possessed" by the Demonic Revenant was one thing—after all, the demon seemed relatively hygienic, and possibly even smelled decent. But if his sword got soaked with these flowers' "menstrual discharge", how could Xuan Ji ever bring himself to return it to his spine?

Should a man have to carry so many burdens on his back?

He nearly dropped the cumbersome Goatee right then and there. But no matter how foul-smelling the situation, Xuan Ji was a young man who lived by "moral standards and refined virtues". Refusing to abandon the life in his hands, he stretched out a leg and kicked the sword into the air. Clutching Goatee, he leapt after the sword, intending to catch it between his feet

before it could touch the "bloodbath" below.

But the blood-like flower juice turned out to be inexplicably gravity-defying. In the process of running down the walls, it changed course and sprayed out horizontally. The crimson liquid collided with Xuan Ji's wings and instantly evaporated, transforming into a sheer pink mist. Before Xuan Ji could admire the spectacle, Goatee cried out. A few drops of the liquid had splattered onto his hand, causing his skin to sizzle as though burnt by acid. He jolted awake and began to writhe in agonising pain, his hand dotted with deep, dark spots.

These plants really were toxic!

The mist quickly thickened, perhaps due to the intense heat radiating from Xuan Ji's wings. Goatee's exposed skin began to blister and corrode as if he were being burnt alive. The pink miasma rose to the cave's ceiling, where it condensed on the cold stone and cascaded back down in a shower. Though Xuan Ji wasn't responsible for the "acid rain", he had unwittingly become its courier!

Xuan Ji no longer had the luxury of worrying about his sword; he had to protect the living. He pulled his legs in tightly and wrapped his massive wings around both himself and Goatee, forming an impenetrable shield. The greatsword he'd kicked into the air came clanging back down with the bloody rain and landed right in the shallow pool, immediately sinking to the bottom. Peeking out from the gap between his feathers, Xuan Ji could see a stone platform just beneath the water's surface. It was about three square metres in size, and there was something on top of it...

Xuan Ji's eyes widened—

Atop the platform lay a coffin—open and completely empty. His sword had fallen right into it!

Before Xuan Ji could move to retrieve it, he felt a sudden wave of dread surge through him. Cold emptiness and searing pain pierced his chest like iron spikes. A sharp "crack" echoed in his ears as though something, somewhere, had broken. He was left momentarily breathless.

A cascade of blood-like liquid flowed into the pool, turning the once clear waters a shocking crimson—

At that moment, far in the depths of the Crimson Abyss, the patrolling Armament Spirits came to a halt. Sabre One sensed something amiss and turned to look at the altar—another stone stele had inexplicably split!

The Armament Spirits gathered around the damaged stele. Sabre One cautiously reached out with his decayed hand, hoping to mend the fracture. But before he could touch it, the stone emitted a soft cracking sound—and crumbled into dust. A flash of white light burst forth from the shattered stone and soared skyward like a rocket, blazing towards the eastern horizon.

The Armament Spirits exchanged glances, their frigid armour rattling faintly in the wind. They were so ancient that their memories had become as rusty as their bodies. They couldn't remember what the stele's breaking signified, but... something about it felt deeply ominous.

As the sword plunged into the pool, Sheng Lingyuan felt as if

his seven apertures had been sealed. As though from shock, his senses numbed, and his heart pounded fiercely—like something was trying to shoot out through his chest. He had no desire to know what that "something" was. For a fleeting moment, a nameless fear arose within him—a desperate wish for the crimson waters to harden into a cocoon and block out the world, to hide him away until the end of time.

But there wasn't a single inch of land in this world he could call a refuge. Peace, respite, repose... To him, these were but fantasies. His memories awoke like a beast roused from slumber, its eyes flicking open—and its jaws parting wide to greet him.

Tremors shook the cave as the greatsword gave rise to a low hum. All of the remaining blossoms on the walls withered simultaneously, and a perilous whirlpool began to churn in the water surrounding the coffin. The water level began to fall as the liquid in the pool was drawn into the coffin by some unseen force.

Drenched in cold sweat, Xuan Ji breathed deeply, trying to recover from the sudden drum concert in his chest. He watched in shock as the blood-red liquid drained into the coffin, leaving the pool crystal clear once more. The coffin broke the surface, but his sword was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a person—though Xuan Ji wasn't sure if "person" was entirely the right word.

Goatee's eyes darted about frantically in their sockets. He would faint from terror at the sight below, only to be jolted awake again. Suspended between "life and death", he was verging on madness. Even Xuan Ji felt his hair stand on end. He had

thought that after witnessing lightning reduce someone to dust from a front-row seat, he'd be able to breeze through any horror movie, be it local or foreign. Yet, this "person" surpassed even his most nightmarish imaginings—for it was barely shaped like a human at all.

Inside the coffin was a corpse so scorched and mutilated, it was impossible to distinguish its head from its feet. Not a single inch of flesh or bone was intact. Its spine had been bisected, and the two halves of its body were barely held together by charred, blackened tissue. And yet, this ruined body was moving!

With a sickening squelch, stark white bones pierced through the charred skin. Rattling noisily, they twisted and writhed as though searching for their rightful configuration. Soon, they assembled themselves into a slender skeletal frame around which sinews and muscle began to form anew.

Xuan Ji shuddered violently. Growing layers of flesh and skin looked to be even more excruciating than being shredded by the Dark Descent's backlash. He vividly remembered the way the Demonic Revenant had stood motionless atop the building, smiling silently until he'd been reduced to dust. But the "charred corpse" was clearly in pain. Its fingers bored into the coffin with such force that the inch-thick bronze walls warped under its grip. But it could only scream in silence; its tongue and vocal cords had yet to form.

Even as a bystander, Xuan Ji felt as if his own body were burning from the inside out. He couldn't even feel the cold sweat gathering on his skin.

A full quarter of an hour passed before the corpse's flesh and

bones completely reformed. Pale human skin spread across the bloody frame, followed by long hair that cascaded down like a waterfall, enshrouding the entire coffin. The hands that had been clawing at the coffin's sides finally released their grip and fell away. Dripping with water, the pale, slender fingers resembled white jade that had been perfected over a thousand years of polishing.

Xuan Ji recognised those hands—not so long ago, he had been attacked by them. Somehow, that damned Demonic Revenant had re-emerged from his sword!

By then, the surface of the pool had dropped nearly two metres, revealing the stone platform in its entirety. From above, Xuan Ji could see that it was covered in two layers of intricate glyphs. One layer had been etched directly into the stone. Its patterns were unfamiliar, but they seemed more like an unknown script than mere decoration. The second layer had been painted over the first. Xuan Ji recognised these symbols: they were a Dark Descent inscription.

When the water stilled, Xuan Ji hesitated briefly before alighting on the platform. As he tiptoed around the eerie writing, he heard disordered, frantic breathing.

"Uh... Are you..." Xuan Ji asked uncertainly, "Are you... alive?"

The person in the coffin stirred but didn't answer.

Xuan Ji looked around and found a small space free of glyphs. It was only after he set down the tongue-lolling Goatee that he realised something was missing.

Wait a second... Where the hell is my sword?

As he returned to his senses, the pile-up of questions threatened to burst from his mind.

What in the world was going on here? Hadn't the Demonic Revenant been sliced into pieces and struck down by lightning? Where had *this* body come from? How had he managed to regain a physical form?

But Xuan Ji could sort these details out later. The more pressing issue was: if the Demonic Revenant was free, then where was his greatsword?

That sword had been an extension of Xuan Ji himself and moved in accordance with his will. After it had been possessed by the Demonic Revenant, he'd developed some sort of "separation anxiety", becoming restless whenever he and the weapon were apart. But now, he had no sense of where the sword was at all—and that inexplicable agitation had evaporated into thin air!

Xuan Ji approached the coffin to look for the sword, but before he could search properly, his gaze fell upon the figure within.

Back at the hospital, Xuan Ji had fought tooth and nail against Sheng Lingyuan; of course he recognised him. The man in the coffin had the same face, the same build, and even the same volume of hair. Yet, somehow, Xuan Ji couldn't shake the feeling that this person was somehow different from the Revenant he'd faced in Chiyuan. That "Sheng Lingyuan" had turned to ash before his very eyes. Not even a vacuum could have put him back together. More importantly, that Revenant had seemed entirely devoid of "life", as though he couldn't feel pain

and had no emotions. Watching his demise had been akin to seeing lightning strike a tree—uncomfortable, but impersonal.

However, the man in the coffin was very much alive, and Xuan Ji could almost feel his agony. He was lying silently in the coffin, unable to even push himself upright. His sharp shoulder blades strained against his skin as he trembled with every laboured breath.

The instant Xuan Ji had a proper look at him, he was consumed by a maelstrom of overwhelming emotion. It was as though a grudge spanning millennia had finally ended, or he'd caught a glimpse of dawn after being trapped in a boundless night. An indescribable medley of grief and ecstasy left him trembling to his very core. Never in his life had he experienced such extremes of joy and sorrow. Xuan Ji pressed a hand to his chest, fighting back tears. His soul seemed to have drifted away as his body stood there, transfixed, for what felt like an eternity.

The figure in the coffin was pale, as though he hadn't seen the sun for a thousand years. His hair, dark as ink, fell against a smear of dried blood on his cheek. It connected to the reddened corner of his eyes like a bloody tear streak. The stark contrast between red and white was breathtaking.

Also...

He wasn't wearing any clothes.

Wait a second!

Xuan Ji snapped back to his senses, breaking free from the strange surge of emotion. He had been staring at a naked man for long enough to be arrested for harassment—twice over!

"Uh... look, it wasn't—I... I didn't mean to look! You just

popped up out of nowhere without warning..." Xuan Ji hastily averted his gaze, but the image might as well have been burnt into his retinas. He blinked hard and frantically patted down his body in search of something he could pull off to cover the man. But he quickly realised he had nothing—his jacket and sweater had been burnt into tatters by his wings, and he wasn't in the habit of wearing thermals. If he took off his trousers, he'd be no better than the bare-legged Haier Brothers! No one could be that selfless!

"Maybe I could, uh... strip the clothes off that goatee guy for you? They're a bit smelly, though... Do you mind?" Xuan Ji's eyes darted around the cavern as he babbled.

Ignoring him, Sheng Lingyuan rested a hand on the coffin's edge and gestured feebly.

The withered vines that had produced the "bleeding flowers" sprang into motion, twining themselves together like the double-ribbed stitches on Xuan Ji's sweater. They formed a long robe that fell around Sheng Lingyuan's shoulders. But the weight of this single piece of clothing was enough to push him down flat.

Xuan Ji instinctively reached out to help but stopped himself halfway, surprised by his own impulse. Just then, he heard Sheng Lingyuan attempt to speak.

Xuan Ji held his breath. "What?"

Each word was forced out through clenched teeth, Sheng Lingyuan's trembling voice tinged with the scent of blood.

"Who... Who dared open his coffin..."

"Whose coffin?" Xuan Ji raised his brows. "You mean there was someone in this coffin?"

Sheng Lingyuan suddenly lifted his head, his eyes turning even redder. Xuan Ji followed his gaze but saw nothing of note. Then, he heard a splash and realised—Goatee was no longer on the platform!

While one of them had been struggling to move and the other was having some sort of crisis, Goatee must have woken up. Or perhaps he hadn't been unconscious to begin with. He'd used the chance to flee, diving into the pool and swimming away with clumsy yet practised strokes.

Following the sound, Xuan Ji caught sight of a hole in the rocky wall, just wide enough for a single person to pass through. It had been hidden when the water level was higher, but now the opening was exposed. Goatee was swimming purposefully towards it—he must have been here before!

Sheng Lingyuan's fingers, so weak they couldn't fasten a robe, curled around air. Veins bulged fiercely across the back of his hand as Goatee was yanked out of the water and sent hurtling head-first towards the platform. Before Goatee's head could crack open like a melon against the stone, Xuan Ji unfurled his wings and swooped in just in time to catch his ankle.

"Hey, boss! It's a human head, not a shotput ball! You think everyone has a skull as tough as yours?" Xuan Ji felt a violent force yank Goatee from his grip. "Hey!"

Xuan Ji was still holding Goatee's legs, but his upper body was pulled relentlessly towards the coffin. A sickly pale hand extended from within and closed around his throat with deadly intent. Goatee's body convulsed as he struggled. His face turned purple as blood rushed to his head, and ominous cracking

sounds could be heard from his neck.

Sheng Lingyuan ignored Xuan Ji completely. His voice barely made it out of his throat, sounding like two bloodstained iron plates scraping together. Squeezing out each word, he asked, "Who... opened... the... coffin...?"

Xuan Ji suspected the Demonic Revenant would wring Goatee's head clean off. He darted forward and grabbed Sheng Lingyuan's wrist. "Let go! You're going to kill him!"

The moment he touched Sheng Lingyuan, Xuan Ji froze—this hand was nothing like the Revenant's had been at the hospital. It was warm, had a pulse—and was even slightly feverish. He faltered. At that very moment, Xuan Ji's ringtone blared through the cavern like the crack of thunder.

Xuan Ji applied pressure to Sheng Lingyuan's pulse point. Perhaps due to exhaustion, the Revenant finally released his grip and fell back limply into the coffin. Xuan Ji barely managed to catch Goatee with one hand as he fumbled for his phone with the other. He hadn't had a signal since falling into this hellhole—otherwise, Luo Cuicui and the others would have blown up his phone long ago. After hours of silence, the mobile seemed to have had a sudden change of heart and was offering him two bars—a meagre showing, but better than nothing.

A name was flashing across the screen: Xiao Zheng.

When Luo Cuicui delivered his news, Xiao Zheng had nearly had a heart attack.

He knew that Xuan Ji could be unpredictable at times—after all, they hadn't just met yesterday. But as the former commander

of a special task force, Xiao Zheng had never doubted Xuan Ji's ability. Who would have thought that after all his talk about "wiping asses", he'd drop the ball at the worst possible moment? Xiao Zheng's ears were already ringing from the endless barrage of accusatory voices—as noisy as a bustling street market—while Luo Cuicui's tear-choked whining poured through the receiver.

Madam Jade clearly sensed that something was amiss. Her eyes glinted as she asked Xiao Zheng, "Is something wrong? Was there an emergency at the Bureau?"

Over the line, Luo Cuicui sniffled and fumbled out numerous (unwise) suggestions. "Mr Xuan was pulled under, and we're just support staff! What can we do by ourselves? You've got to call in backup! The field agents here are all in quarantine, but what about the leader of the metahuman community in Dongchuan? Whoever calls the shots, anyone will do—just please, hurry up and find us some help!"

Dongchuan's local big shot was none other than Master Yuede, a living relic from the late Qing dynasty who dressed like an unearthed corpse. He was enjoying the commotion with beady eyes from across the table.

Unable to bear it anymore, Xiao Zheng stood up and, enduring all sorts of pointed glances, strode to the restroom. Once inside a stall, he whipped four soundproofing talismans out of his wallet and plastered one on each wall. He managed to console the blubbering mess on the line before phoning the special task force agents stationed near Dongchuan for support, stressing that they "send only the best". The ARB was in crisis from with-

in and without; after an exhausting round of phone calls, Xiao Zheng found himself dialling Xuan Ji's number, hoping to ease his own anxiety. He couldn't remember if it was the eighth or ninth attempt when the call finally connected.

Both caller and receiver were equally shocked; they practically spoke in unison.

"What's going on?" Xiao Zheng demanded.

"What's the situation?" Xuan Ji asked.

"I'm asking *you* what the situation is!" Xiao Zheng shot up from the toilet, firing out words like a machine gun. "Are you trying to kill me with anger?! What on earth are you doing, and where have you buzzed off to? What is your location right now?"

"Don't even ask. It's... complicated. I, uh... I think I'm in a tomb?" As Xuan Ji looked down at the bronze coffin and the chilling stone platform beneath it, his eyes drifted over to Sheng Lingyuan. The man was slumped against the coffin's walls, barely breathing, and his long, wet hair resembled seaweed as it lay among tangled vines. He looked like a ghost that had just taken over someone's body and wasn't used to making it move.

Momentarily distracted by the sight, Xuan Ji gave his superior a pile of nothing. "There's something peculiar about this tomb. There's a coffin inside..."

Well, that's news. A coffin in a tomb. What else would you expect—a stove? Already on edge, Xiao Zheng instantly blew up. "Then, why don't you just lie down in it and stay there forever!"

"Wait, let me explain! There's more to it!" Xiao Zheng's speaker-breaking volume jolted Xuan Ji back to reality, and he

tore his eyes away from the demon. "This place is swarming with Mirage Butterflies, and they've been chasing me nonstop. Anyway, I'm fine now. There's something about this bronze coffin that's repelling them. The coffin's on a stone altar engraved with glyphs, but I can't make sense of them. When you find these kinds of spells around a coffin... well, they're usually for binding souls or sealing evil—definitely not a prayer for peaceful rest. The coffin's empty now; someone must have opened it recently. The original glyphs were painted over with Dark Descent glyphs. Hang on, I have the suspect right here."

Xuan Ji carefully positioned himself like a wall between Sheng Lingyuan and Goatee. He angled himself towards the Revenant, ready to act at the first sign of aggression, and switched the mobile to speakerphone. Then, he stomped on where Goatee was most sensitive. "Let's see if you have the nerve to play dead again!"

Goatee's eyes had begun rolling back, only to snap forward again. Seeing Xuan Ji's menacing avian figure looming over him, the man whimpered in fright.

"What are you crying about? Do I look *that* scary?" Xuan Ji grumbled. "I can't believe you bastards had the balls to go grave digging at a mass burial site... No words. Seriously."

Goatee's voice quaked violently. "I—I didn't! I've never done anything as despicable as grave robbing! It—it was Lang! He and his crew forced me—"

"Who's Lang?"

"Lang is, uh... Ji—Ji Qingchen! That's his real name!" Goatee squirmed on his ass, trying to free himself from Xuan Ji's foot.

"It's all him! I don't know anything! *Aah! Please, great immortal, spare me—*" His voice cracked as his gaze froze on Sheng Lingyuan. The demon had finally managed to sit up and was fixing him in a cold, piercing glare. Goatee desperately scooted towards the edge of the platform.

Hearing the man's sudden scream over the phone, Xiao Zheng asked Xuan Ji in confusion, "What did you do to him? If you're going to hit him, at least get him to talk first."

"It wasn't me! It was..." Xuan Ji trailed off, seized by an inexplicable resistance. It blocked his throat, preventing him from revealing Sheng Lingyuan's presence. He chewed on his tongue, suspecting another one of the Demonic Revenant's psychic manipulations. They were hard to defend against and took hold at the smallest lapse in focus. Compared to his influence, Bi Chunsheng's metanatural ability seemed like child's play. It was no wonder that the demons of legend were said to devour human souls.

Xuan Ji quickly gathered his thoughts and refocused, blocking Sheng Lingyuan's line of sight as he questioned Goatee. "What were you and Ji Qingchen up to down here?"

"Looking... Looking for black jars..."

"What 'black jars'?" Xiao Zheng immediately pressed.

Even with Xuan Ji between them, the Demonic Revenant had Goatee paralysed with terror. The sight of a single lock of Sheng Lingyuan's hair resting on the coffin's edge was enough to scare him into pissing himself. He answered every question readily, albeit incoherently.

"T-the black jars are precious to them. They're filled with the

'good stuff', d-dug straight out of the ground... They say one jar's a 'curse' and the other's the 'antidote'. F-first, they put a curse on the sucker, get him 'possessed'. Then they slap the antidote on his forehead, and he'll be all better, g-guaranteed! Whatever price they ask, they get. Lang said it's fast money... I told him no, it's a despicable idea! But he wouldn't listen..."

The words bordered on gibberish, but both Xiao Zheng and Xuan Ji got the picture. Just as Luo Cuicui had speculated on the plane, Ji Qingchen had a tool capable of inflicting symptoms akin to "possession"—along with a corresponding "cure" that miraculously remedied the "affliction". They'd poison the victims themselves, then offer their own antidote, robbing them blind.

"These things"—Xuan Ji asked—"these 'black jars' you're talking about. Where did they come from? Was Ji Qingchen the only one using them?"

"T-they used to buy them on the black market. They all use them..."

Xiao Zheng narrowed his eyes. "Who's 'they'?"

"The masters... all the masters use them! Otherwise, there'd be no patrons... Even the real ones, Master Yuede's disciples, they all use them!"

Despite the soundproofing charms, Xiao Zheng kept his voice lowered. "*Who* did you say? Say that again!"

Overcome with terror, Goatee was now in a near-manic state. Trembling, he shouted, "Master Yuede and his people all do it, I know they do! Master Yuede has eight hundred disciples, and every year they all have to report their accomplishments to him. If they don't have anything to show, the master says they're not

practising diligently enough and they... they get expelled!"

Xuan Ji winced. "What? Even in that line of business, they can't escape KPIs?"

"You shut up!" Xiao Zheng shouted.

Goatee's teeth chattered violently.

Xiao Zheng slowed his speech, enunciating each word clearly: "So... what you're saying is that you live in a peaceful land where all manner of demons and ghosts coexist with humans harmoniously, leaving Master Yuede's disciples unable to meet their 'demon-hunting quotas'. So they decided to just *create* problems themselves?"

No wonder that ancient zombie was scrambling about like his life depended on it. He must have realised that his band of disciples was getting too caught up in the same shady business as Goatee and Ji Qingchen. That bastard wanted to use the mess at the ARB to cover his own unwiped ass!

Just then, Sheng Lingyuan let out a low, chilling laugh.

Thinking it was Xuan Ji, Xiao Zheng snapped, "What are you laughing at? I don't need opinions from the peanut gallery. I'll deal with *you* later!"

Xuan Ji rolled his eyes. *Just my luck.*

"L-Lang must've been bewitched. I don't know what connections he went through, but he somehow got his hands on a black jar. He said it was his goldmine... He was the one making the money. I... I just did him some small favours and pocketed a little loose change, that's all... Honest! I've got nothing to do with this!"

"Enough." Xuan Ji kicked him. "How do you explain this

hole in the wall then?"

Goatee's eyes darted about wildly. He truly had the tenacity of a cockroach. Just a moment ago, his spirit had nearly left him from fright, yet here he was, gearing up to spin another tale. Xuan Ji had to give it to him; that took talent.

Sheng Lingyuan seemed to have finally recovered some energy. Propping himself up on the edge of the coffin, he stepped out.

The moment Goatee met Sheng Lingyuan's gaze, he was overtaken by a colossal wave of terror. He dove down to cower at Xuan Ji's feet. "I'll talk! I'll tell you everything! Please... Don't come any closer!

"He used up that first black jar... But after getting a taste of what it could offer, he wanted more, and he began looking for another source. He eventually found one... I t-think it was Master Yuede's final disciple. Lang spent tens of thousands treating that disciple to meals. He begged and pleaded, even pimped out some girls to him, but he just... he couldn't get another jar. It was driving him mad. Then... then one of the escorts said the disciple let something slip while drunk... he said they'd been digging the 'stuff' up from the ground, but they'd run out of it. Even their own people were fighting over it... Lang completely lost his mind! He sent her off to find out where they'd been digging it up..."

The whole story rolled off his tongue like he was doing standup, but by some miracle, Xuan Ji had been able to follow along. "So you were bold enough to break into the tomb that woman told you about in hopes of digging up more of those 'black jars'

or whatever. Only you stumbled upon a mass grave instead?"

"We... We just... We had no idea..."

"What mass grave?" Xiao Zheng asked.

"I'll explain later." Xuan Ji crouched down to seize Goatee by his collar. "Who painted these symbols on the ground?"

Goatee's face looked slightly twisted in the phone's dim light. "That was Lang too... I don't know where he learnt them, but he said they were for protection, in case there was something underground... We hired some diggers—uh, grave robbers, really—and we followed the map that woman stole. We dug all the way down here... where we found this..." He raised a trembling hand and pointed at the bronze coffin.

Sheng Lingyuan's hands had turned blue from cold. Lost in thought, he lightly brushed his fingers over the patterns on the coffin. His face looked blank—distant and unreadable.

"The instant they saw the coffin, the grave robbers all went mad, like they were on drugs. One old guy tried to warn them not to mess with anything down here. He said the whole place reeked of bad fengshui, and anyone buried here was destined to suffer eternal damnation... He pointed out that the coffin was surrounded by water, with glyphs engraved into the altar. He didn't know what they meant, but he figured they were there to suppress an evil being... But the others just wouldn't listen. Someone even insisted that the coffin looked like a relic from the Great Upheaval. He said that after thousands of years, the earth's crust had shifted countless times, and the fengshui must have changed too. That if the coffin was still so well-preserved, there had to be treasure inside..."

The whole group had been arguing, but in the end, the greediest and most shameless of them had won out.

"So you opened the coffin?" Xuan Ji asked.

"N-no! *I* didn't—it was them! *All them*! I told them not to open it!" Goatee insisted fervently. "Lang said to draw the 'charm' first, just to be safe, so they scribbled that... that chicken scratch onto the altar. Then they burnt incense and kowtowed at the coffin..."

Xuan Ji was rendered momentarily speechless. "That's... pretty ceremonious for a bunch of grave robbers. Civilised tomb raiding, huh?"

Goatee raised his head. The eery way his eyes reflected the phone's light was reminiscent of will 'o the wisps. "When they opened the coffin, me and the old guy were the only ones who didn't dare to get close. The rest all pried the lid off together, and this strange flowery smell wafted out from inside. Then, I... inside I saw a... a *person*..."

"What were you expecting?" Xuan Ji asked. *What else would be in a coffin of that size? A dog?!*

"It was... a person..." Goatee gulped. "Not bones! Not a mummy! His whole body was perfectly intact, like... like he was just sleeping! His limbs... his forehead... they were all nailed into the coffin with long spikes..."

Xuan Ji heard a creak and looked towards its source. Sheng Lingyuan had propped himself against the coffin, denting its surface. His face was expressionless.

"The old guy dropped to his knees immediately... but the others acted like they were possessed, shouting about 'treasure'.

They piled onto the coffin and began pulling the spikes out of the body... Then they started fighting... Someone pulled a knife and stabbed one of the others to death... The coffin was drenched in blood... B-but I swear, I didn't see anything in there besides the body!"

A drop of condensation trickled down the icy stone walls. It splashed into the pond with an echo, sending fine ripples across the water's surface. A chill ran up Xuan Ji's bare back.

"I was scared shitless! But those grave robbers, they all completely lost it. They slashed at each other like they had some kind of lifelong grudge. Lang, that idiot... I don't know what was wrong with him, but he just stood there, next to the coffin. He didn't join in or flee... Almost got himself stabbed! I grabbed him and ran with the old guy... The water in the pool started rising and nearly flooded the hole we'd dug. We barely scrambled out of there! The old guy didn't even ask for the rest of his payment—he just bolted.

"I thought the whole thing had been a nightmare, but... A few days later, Lang came knocking on my door. He said he'd secretly grabbed a small jade box that was on that corpse's chest while the robbers were fighting. It had a carving of a butterfly, and the jade... You could almost see through it. Inside were a few tiny black seeds, about the size of sesame seeds. They looked exactly like the 'curse' from the black jar, except there was no antidote. We didn't care at the time because we still had a bit of the 'antidote' left from before. Lang reckoned that even a small amount of this stuff could fetch a few million. Once we ran out of antidote, we could sell the rest to Master Yuede's disciples for

more profit..."

Xuan Ji immediately understood that these black seeds could very well have been the mutated butterfly eggs. "Did you use any of them? How many?"

"Just... Just one," Goatee bleated. "But this stuff turned out to be something else... After we gave that kid the 'curse', it didn't work like before. With the others, they'd do anything Lang told them, so our 'predictions' always came true. Their families believed us without question. But with this kid... We couldn't control him at all. Lang said we must've given him the wrong stuff. So he went into hiding. Didn't say where he was going. We split up to avoid suspicion, but who would have thought..."

Who would have thought that Ji Qingchen would meet his end at the Crimson Canyon? But why had he gone there in the first place? Had it been coincidence—or fate? Ji Qingchen had been the final sacrifice in Bi Chunsheng's ritual, and he too had a Mirage Butterfly within him. But where and when had he actually gotten infected?

When the grave robbers in front of the coffin turned on each other, they must have suffered some kind of psychic attack—one that induced hallucinations. But Ji Qingchen alone had been immune. Was it due to a natural resistance, or had he already fallen under the butterfly's control?

The Dark Descent incident at the canyon had nearly toppled the entire ARB. And the bloody inscription scrawled in the mysterious shaman burial mound echoed the ritual glyphs from back then. Was this all just the tip of the iceberg in some grand conspiracy?

"I didn't dare show my face. I hired some people to look for Master Yuede's so-called 'final disciple', but they couldn't find him—it was like he'd vanished into thin air. I... I ran out of money and had no options left. I saw your comment and thought you were just another mark Lang hadn't gotten around to closing on..."

Xuan Ji laughed in exasperation. "So you were looking to inherit his legacy?"

Wait a second!

Something was off about this story. Goatee said that the grave robbers fought to the death over an ancient corpse in this very place. In that case, where was the corpse? The blood? The grave robbers' bodies?

"It's not like that, I swear!" Goatee wailed. "I just wanted to check things out, see if I could help somehow—honest! Whether I could do anything or not, it's the thought that counts, right? And sure, if I could pick up some travel funds along the way... But as soon as your colleague opened the back of the van, it was there... that smell..."

"What smell?" Xuan Ji immediately asked.

"Flowers... Rotting flowers. Sweet but foul. I'll never forget it—it was the same smell from when they opened the coffin—" Goatee froze. He wrinkled his nose. Then, his pupils dilated as his entire body convulsed in terror. Xuan Ji sniffed the air on reflex. The cave was damp and poorly ventilated, filled with the stale scent of wet earth. But beneath that earthiness was the faint yet unmistakable fragrance of flowers.

"It's here... it's here..." Goatee stammered.

As if in response, bubbles began to rise from the depths of the pool, gurgling on the surface. A childlike laugh echoed through the eerie cave. The voice sounded bright and youthful as it spoke in what seemed to be the shamanic language. Xuan Ji could only discern one word, spoken imperfectly in the language of the court—

"Lingyuan."

At that moment, Xuan Ji's phone cut out again, and Sheng Lingyuan's already pale face drained of all remaining colour. Xuan Ji heard the boyish voice begin humming a familiar tune, but before he had a chance to place it, Goatee screamed. He leapt three feet into the air and nearly landed in Xuan Ji's arms. The source of his terror was obvious—a cluster of bloated corpses was rising from the bubbling water below!

A commotion of shouts and hurried footsteps erupted, echoing from the tunnel Xuan Ji had come through. It sounded like a large group was approaching. But that path... Wasn't it supposed to lead to the mass grave filled with nothing but skeletons?

Xuan Ji kicked one of the bloated corpses back into the water. Grabbing Goatee, he spun around to face Sheng Lingyuan. "Hey! Are you coming or not?"

Sheng Lingyuan's gaze was vacant and unfocused. Swearing under his breath, Xuan Ji dashed forward and hauled the Revenant up as well.

What's wrong with me? Why am I even bothering with him?! Xuan Ji thought incredulously. But he continued to grip Sheng Lingyuan's wrist tightly as he flew towards the half-submerged exit hole. He folded his wings, but before he could make a prop-

er landing, he was beset by an ominous premonition. At that exact moment, the weight in his other hand went slack. Goatee had soundlessly collapsed.

A thin line shot out from Goatee's eye, piercing straight through the back of his head. Blood and brain matter splattered across Xuan Ji's hand. That deadly thread coiled menacingly towards Xuan Ji's arm, only to ignite the instant it touched him.

A scream interrupted the haunting melody echoing through the tomb. A tall, shadowy figure appeared from the other end of the tunnel. He spoke a word that Xuan Ji somehow barely understood: "Yao!"

Sheng Lingyuan finally reacted and slowly pushed Xuan Ji aside. The tunnel's ceiling was too low for him; he had to bow his head slightly just to stand. Leaning unsteadily against the stone wall, he whispered a single name.

"Arjin."

It was then that Xuan Ji recognised the song—it was the melody he'd heard in Sheng Lingyuan's memories, accompanied by the image of a pear tree. Somehow, he had known how it continued.

A faint light flickered in the narrow tunnel, and the figure emerged from the shadows. The newcomer was holding a glowing white flower in his hand. His slender frame and inconspicuous Adam's apple gave him a youthful, androgynous look. The braids of his long hair were tied back, framing a handsome face half-hidden behind a wooden mask. That mask was carved into a grinning visage that matched his own smile. His unmasked right eye had a dark iris. Large and as round as a grape, it exuded

a boyish charm.

He could have passed for one of those exotic idols on television—that is, if it hadn't been for the bloody hole in his forehead.

As he studied the figure, Xuan Ji frowned and glanced at Sheng Lingyuan. Who was this person? He had never heard the name "Arjin" before. However, Goatee had mentioned that the "corpse" in the coffin had been nailed through the forehead. And this young man had a bloody wound in that very spot. More than likely, the coffin in the pool had been his resting place.

What on earth was going on? When had reviving corpses become the latest trend?

The forty odd thousand bodies in the burial mound lay crowded together in a cramped "dorm", yet this guy had his own "private bedroom". Clearly, he must have been part of the oppressive ruling class. Sheng Lingyuan had just mentioned it—what was the title of the shamans' leader again?

"Are you the chieftain of the shamans... or that 'Sage' something?" Xuan Ji asked.

But the masked person was both ancient and foreign. He seemed unlikely to understand the "modern language" of his own time, much less Xuan Ji's. He tilted his head in a wide-eyed expression of earnest curiosity. It was a childlike gesture, most commonly seen in kindergarten performances. Anyone over the age of twelve making such a face would seem either slow-witted or mentally unstable. But oddly enough, this strange masked youth made it look natural, as if his innocence was innately con-

vincing.

"Chieftain," Sheng Lingyuan answered on his behalf. "He is Arjin, the last chieftain of the shamans."

At the sound of his own name, Arjin's face lit up. Grinning, he revealed a pair of small but sharp canine teeth.

Xuan Ji glanced sideways at the Demonic Revenant. "You know him? So... is he alive or dead?"

"What do you think?" Sheng Lingyuan replied coldly, his eyes passing over Xuan Ji's wings as the latter awkwardly attempted to fold them in the cramped space. Sheng Lingyuan's gaze was icy, as if he never wanted to see those wings again. "He was summoned by the Dark Descent. What do you think he is?"

Cold sweat ran down Xuan Ji's back as he surreptitiously opened *The Yao Compendium* in his eye. For once, the book didn't fail him, delivering the answer almost immediately: Demonic Revenant.

Another one! Were they being mass-produced now?!

Struck by an idea, Xuan Ji angled his head slightly and looked through the *Compendium* at Sheng Lingyuan. As expected, the page came up completely blank. Xuan Ji inwardly sighed—it wasn't that surprising, considering how this damned book seemed to glitch out every time it encountered this person. Last time, it froze up before declaring him a jade sculpture, only to correct its assessment to Demonic Revenant aeons later. This time...

As Xuan Ji silently groused, faint characters began to emerge across the *Compendium*'s page. At least it reacted more quickly this time. Xuan Ji fixed his gaze on the strokes, only to see a sin-

gle word: Calamity.

What the hell?! This damned thing is definitely infected with a virus!

Sheng Lingyuan braced his hand against the damp stone wall and listened to the youth speak in a language familiar to those who lived three thousand years ago. "Aren't you happy to see me, Lingyuan-*gege*?"

"Just like I'm in a dream," Sheng Lingyuan said quietly. After a long pause, he sighed and stretched his hands out towards the shadow. In a tender whisper, his voice carried the words, "Arjin, come here. Let me see you."

Xuan Ji couldn't understand the words spoken in the shamans' tongue. But having been tricked by the Demonic Revenant repeatedly, he took an automatic step back the moment Sheng Lingyuan's tone turned affectionate. He was probably up to something.

But Arjin didn't seem to share his caution. Upon hearing Sheng Lingyuan's honeyed words, he stared dazedly at the man wrapped in a robe of withered vines. A blush rose on the visible half of his face—then deepened, spreading to his eyes. Even the expression on the mask hiding the other half of his face turned teary. "I've been trapped here alone... I don't know for how long. Then those people forced me to wake up with the Dark Descent. I went outside to have a look, but... where is this? Is this still Dongchuan? Why are there so many mortals? I can't understand a word they're saying."

Sheng Lingyuan replied gently, "I know."

"I kept following that person." Arjin pointed at Goatee's

corpse. "Then I sensed your aura, so I brought you here... Lingyuan, is it really you? Am I... Am I dreaming? I've missed you so much."

Sheng Lingyuan subtly lowered his eyelids, then lifted them, giving a "nod" with his gaze. Almost inaudibly, he whispered, "I know."

Arjin stepped closer. "Lingyuan-*gege*, what happened to my clan?"

Xuan Ji caught a flash of sorrow on the Demonic Revenant's face, so fleeting he thought he'd imagined it.

As if bewitched, Arjin slowly grasped Sheng Lingyuan's outstretched hand and murmured sadly, "There are so many new and fun things outside. I can't understand what they're for... But the pictures on the walls move, and iron bugs buzz along the roads... At night, there are colourful lights everywhere, and the streets are filled with sweet smells. It's like a festival every day, livelier than the new year..." His voice suddenly dropped. "They're all so happy, Lingyuan-*gege*."

Sheng Lingyuan's throat bobbed slightly as he gripped Arjin's hand.

Though Xuan Ji couldn't understand the shaman tongue, he knew how to read the room. Spurred by his intuition, he shouted, "Watch out!"

The sad expression on Arjin's mask abruptly twisted into one of ferocity. "Why do they get to be so happy? I hate it..."

A massive cluster of vines surged out from behind him—the same kind that had spawned the bleeding flowers. Carrying their sinister fragrance, they hurtled towards Sheng Lingyuan.

Xuan Ji was also in their path. He ducked, hands over his head. "Shit!"

Sheng Lingyuan yanked Arjin forward and, swift as lightning, seized him by the throat. Half a head shorter, Arjin was slammed against the wall with his feet dangling. The vines coiled around Sheng Lingyuan's hand, tearing skin and flesh. Yet Sheng Lingyuan didn't even seem to feel pain, refusing to spare the wounds a glance as his lips moved in a silent chant.

Several black spikes shot out from the pool, each over half a foot long. They raced towards Sheng Lingyuan with a low hum. He snatched one out of the air and drove it into Arjin's brow, pinning the masked youth's vicious expression in place with deadly accuracy.

Blood splattered onto Sheng Lingyuan's chin and neck, causing his skin to blister. But the wounds began to heal almost immediately.

Sheng Lingyuan's tender expression remained unchanged as he whispered into Arjin's ear, "If it upsets you, just close your eyes. You don't have to look."

Xuan Ji stayed silent. Who did he think he was warning to "watch out"? These were clearly two wolves tearing each other apart!

The features on Arjin's mask became flat. He gazed at Sheng Lingyuan with hollow eyes, his face only inches away. He muttered a fractured sentence: "When I opened... my eyes... and saw you... I thought... I was still sleeping, but... it was no dream."

Sheng Lingyuan didn't reply, deftly driving several more

spikes through Arjin's limbs.

"You're real, Your Majesty." Arjin suddenly switched to the language of the court. "Who else but you could be so heartless? Who but you is fit to be the merciless Sovereign of the Humans?"

Xuan Ji understood these words, and the title Arjin used was not lost on him. He stared at Sheng Lingyuan's back in disbelief, wondering if his ears had also been infected with the *Compendium*'s virus. He might not have been able to pass "Ancient Language" with perfect marks, but if he hadn't misheard... did this guy just call Sheng Lingyuan the "Sovereign of the Humans"?

The final spike was driven through Arjin's body and into the stone, leaving him completely immobilised. Silence fell, and all Xuan Ji could hear was the frantic beating of his own heart.

"You're..." He looked at Sheng Lingyuan, but as soon as he began, he instinctively switched to a polite tone. "You are..."

His words were cut off when the entire cavern suddenly began to tremble. The narrow tunnel collapsed at both ends, trapping the two with nowhere to escape. From all around, a burst of mad laughter echoed—it was the voice of Arjin, who had just been pinned to the wall!

Chapter 11

Yang Chao sat cross-legged in the back seat of the car, his eyes shut as though deep in meditation. Clasped in his hands was the watch Xuan Ji had dropped. Up front, Luo Cuicui drove while Ping Qianru sat in silence, both wary of disturbing his "communion with the universe".

Neither had expected Yang Chao's conversation with the cosmos to drag on without end. As mealtime came and went, the ravenous Ping Qianru cautiously fished a nut from a bag in her pocket and popped it into her mouth. The moment she did so, Yang Chao's eyes snapped open. She froze, not even daring to chew.

"Sis, can I have one too?" Yang Chao asked.

Ping Qianru nearly choked. Shoving the entire bag of nuts at Yang Chao, she asked, "Well? Did you sense anything? Are we getting closer?"

Yang Chao was a metahuman, but like most in the DRD, he wasn't a very effective one. Yang Chao had extraordinarily keen senses that allowed him to detect intense emotions in nearby

people. He could even use an object to track its owner's general whereabouts and physical condition. He was loosely classified as belonging to the psychic class, but his ability was more of a novelty; it wasn't nearly as useful as Bi Chunsheng's in combat. His accuracy couldn't even compare to a search dog's, and his skills had long since atrophied from lack of practice.

"Hard to say," Yang Chao admitted, looking troubled. "You know my ability is hit-or-miss. Just now, I've suddenly stopped sensing him altogether. Either we've already driven past him, or—"

"Shush!" Ping Qianru cut him off, tapping the back of Luo Cuicui's seat. "Don't jinx it. We must have passed Mr Xuan. Let's turn around, quickly!"

"Turn around?! We can't make a U-turn on the motorway! And who knows when we'll even get backup?" Luo Cuicui grumbled, fully aware of their limitations. "If we could handle this on our own, why would we even be in the DRD?!"

Just then, Yang Chao's phone rang.

"Hello, Mr Xiao..." After a moment, Yang Chao shot upright. "Mr Xiao is sending Tornado over! He wants to know our position!"

At the Penglai Conference, Master Yuede's phone vibrated. Pretending to take a sip of his water, he retrieved it from the table and opened the chat notification. It read: "The ARB is up to something. Tornado's private jet just landed at Dongchuan Airport."

Master Yuede calmly typed a reply. "So what? Our conscience

is clear. We have nothing to be afraid of."

A moment later, another message came in, only to be quickly deleted by the sender. "Master, they've disembarked and are heading straight for our 'mine'. What should we do?"

A shadow flickered across Master Yuede's face.

The so-called "mine" was actually an ancient tomb—a treasure trove he had inherited from the forefathers of his Dongchuan sect. By the time it was passed down to him, the upper levels had been nearly cleaned out. However, everything further below was forbidden ground. Legend had it that no one who descended ever returned alive. Metahumans had heightened senses; they could feel the danger without needing a warning. From a young age, Master Yuede had never even considered exploring further. After all, just a small portion of what lay at the tomb's periphery had been enough to enrich the sect for generations.

The tomb had contained countless ancient texts. A few of them were written in a known archaic script, but most were filled with bizarre, head-scratching symbols. Master Yuede had gathered a team of linguists to try deciphering this cryptic language. But they had barely cracked a small fraction of it—insufficient for proper translation. Yet, just the fragments they could understand allowed the sect to hold dominance over Dongchuan, towering above countless peers.

More precious than the ancient texts, however, were the old "curses". The concept of these curses was recorded in the archaic translations they had excavated from the tomb, written by someone whose identity had long been lost. The true power of the curses lay in their accessibility—anyone, given the proper imple-

ments, was able to use them. Some were devastatingly powerful. But remarkably, every single one came with a counter-curse. Once neutralised, nothing of the original curse would remain—not even aftereffects.

This was the true secret behind the prosperity of Master Yuede's faction.

Since ancient times, people only turned to higher powers in times of need. When crops grew in the fields, weeds grew in the temples. There was no room for a house cat once all of the mice had been caught. And during the last seventy years, there had been no wars or major calamities—most people lived in peace. Whenever something did happen, the ARB would stride in like the police. They were backed by the government and salaried by taxpayer money. But Master Yuede and his sect had to support themselves. The hundreds of disciples at Master Yuede's beck and call couldn't survive on just air.

In times of peace, these "masters" had little purpose. But putting these lofty, enigmatic experts to work in the same mundane jobs as ordinary people was simply unthinkable. Making a living was hard, so Master Yuede and his ilk had to take on the roles of both "villain" and "saviour". His disciples would cast curses on people, and he would swoop in to break them—charging for the service, of course. Everyone at the top understood the game.

Master Yuede's gaze swept across the conference table. This practice had effectively become an industry standard; if it ever came to light, no one here would escape the repercussions. Setting his cup down gently, he thought, *If you dare set foot in my territory, you can forget about leaving.*

Before he could issue orders, a news alert lit up his phone: "A 4.2 magnitude earthquake struck Changning Province at 11:19 p.m. Epicentre in Dongchuan, depth 0 km."

It was followed almost immediately by a message from his disciple: "Master, there's been an earthquake at the 'mine'!"

At that moment, Xuan Ji was standing directly over the "epicentre" of that "earthquake". The instant the tunnel started to collapse, he braced himself for an avalanche of stone. But instead, the ground beneath him gave way, and he found himself falling into darkness. When he landed, he seemed to be somewhere else entirely.

A gentle breeze drifted past, carrying the earthy scent of soil and the delicate calls of birds and cicadas. Before he could conjure a flame for light, someone came rushing over with a torch. His attire was similar to what that strange Arjin character had been wearing, and he was speaking in the same unintelligible language.

Xuan Ji raised a hand to stop him. "Hey, wait a..."

But the figure passed right through him and continued towards a wooden hut at the end of the path.

Xuan Ji stood stunned. *What kind of horror movie scenario is this? Am I the ghost, or is he?*

Just then, a hand gripped his shoulder. Xuan Ji instinctively recoiled, turning to press his flame-bearing fingers against the assailant's neck. The firelight illuminated Sheng Lingyuan's blood-streaked face.

"What is this place? A mirage? Just who the—" Xuan Ji re-

called how Arjin had addressed him—"Sovereign"—and slipped back into a respectful tone. "I mean, would you please tell me who..."

Who exactly are you?

Sheng Lingyuan's gaze passed over Xuan Ji and lingered on their surroundings for a long time before he gave an ambiguous answer. "No."

The two of them were standing atop a small hill. It was lush with greenery that spread halfway up from its base. The winding mountain path was flanked by rows of squat, round houses. From a distance, they looked like mushrooms nestled among the trees. It was a moonless night, and the stars rippled through the sky like waves. Standing in the midst of such serenity, one couldn't help but feel enveloped by a vast calm.

Xuan Ji wasn't sure if Sheng Lingyuan had fully understood his question. He was thinking about rephrasing when the latter slowly said, "Here... this place is not... a mirage."

When he first arrived in this world, Sheng Lingyuan's mind had been like a blank canvas. Everything around him had sparked an eager curiosity. After hearing something said once, he was able to mimic it perfectly. Whenever he saw something new, he would immediately try to understand its function and purpose.

But now, his memories had returned like unwelcome guests. The crushing weight of his resurrected past sat heavily on his heart, draining away any sense of wonder he may have once had. He was like an ancient sword that had just been unearthed, its cold gleam dimming the moment it touched air. Swiftly over-

taken by rust, its once frosty edge became dull and ineffective. His pronunciation of the modern language sounded strange—even less fluent than when he had been parroting phrases at the hospital.

"This is a curse... one of the Seven Grand Curses of the shamans. It is called... Retrograde." Sheng Lingyuan's speech seemed to slow even more. Under the dim light, his face was obscured by shadow, and his voice carried the tiredness of old age. Xuan Ji was inexplicably reminded of the rust-laden Armament Spirits back home. "The body I... I pinned to the wall must have been a decoy, and the curse... it was hidden within that decoy's blood. He must have predicted my eagerness to nail him back into his coffin—that was my oversight."

"What's 'Retrograde'?"

"It's..." Sheng Lingyuan opened his mouth, but he'd forgotten the words he needed. His halting voice came out like a dried-up stream. "When I see him, a memory comes up. I have to relive it. If a memory is... unresolved, I will keep... going in circles within it. Until I die."

In other words, Retrograde was a potentially endless loop of memories!

"Hold on, let me see..." Xuan Ji turned his head; the "shaman" that passed through him earlier had smashed open the door of a small hut at the end of the path. He was muttering something in his own language. Xuan Ji couldn't help but sigh. "What a long day this is turning into."

Xuan Ji had only been planning to fish for some scammers, but he'd accidentally hooked a shark, and it dragged him bodily

into the depths. Instead of figuring out the connection between Ji Qingchen and Bi Chunsheng, he'd ended up in a mass grave. Before he could even make sense of that crazy place, a long-buried shaman chieftain came back to life. The two Demonic Revenants then proceeded to confer in some foreign tongue, exchanging notes about their shared resurrection experience. Xuan Ji couldn't make heads or tails of any of it. And now, he'd been pulled into some mind-boggling curse.

Xuan Ji was left bewildered. *Isn't this a fight between the two Revenants? What the hell does it have to do with me?!* He was just a lowly civil servant who couldn't even get reimbursement for his torn-up clothes. Not only did these two reanimated corpses kill his suspect during their brawl, but now they were dragging *him* into their mess? What had he done to deserve this? Did he have a sign on his back that read "kick me"?

"And, uh, senior... It feels a little awkward bringing this up now, but you know, a loan returned is a favour earned, right? Could you perhaps return my lifebound sword for now? It's not that I'm being stingy. I mean, if I had a second one, I'd gladly gift it to you, but this one is... kind of the only one I have."

"Apologies," Sheng Lingyuan replied. He tried to elaborate but fumbled for the right modern words. After a pause, he said simply, in an apologetic tone, "It is mine."

"Excuse me?" Xuan Ji was dumbstruck. Some people might look respectable on the outside, but the depths of their shamelessness were truly remarkable! "It's *whose*? Did I mishear something?"

"It is my..." Sheng Lingyuan faltered, then gave up entirely

and switched back to his familiar court speech. "It is my remains."

Xuan Ji's eyes widened. This language barrier was becoming really problematic.

"No, I think I genuinely heard you wrong. Did you just say that *my sword*"—Xuan Ji gestured with both arms—"about this wide, used for chopping people up—that sword is your... '*remains*'? As in... whatever's left behind after you die?"

Sheng Lingyuan gave a slight nod. "Yes, my corpse."

"Then what does that make me?" Xuan Ji's voice wavered. "A dashing limited-edition urn?"

Unable to understand Xuan Ji's words, Sheng Lingyuan did not respond. Instead, he said softly, "When I leapt into the fires of the Crimson Abyss, my remains could not be fully destroyed. My soul was scattered, but my body endured."

Leapt into the fires of the Crimson Abyss... Xuan Ji thought. *So he really is...*

But how could that be possible?

When Arjin had called Sheng Lingyuan "Your Majesty" and "Sovereign of the Humans", Xuan Ji thought he must have misheard. After all, apart from the deities of legend, only one person in all of history had earned the title "Sovereign of the Humans" from other races: Sheng Xiao, Emperor Wu of Great Qi. As a mortal, Sheng Xiao had accomplished the impossible, restoring order and achieving feats beyond human reach. Respected and feared throughout the land, it was as if he were a greater being descended to the realm of mortals.

But... the Emperor Wu depicted in history books was a griz-

zled giant with a stern countenance—a rough-hewn and robust figure akin to one of the Four Heavenly Kings themselves. It was a fitting image for Emperor "Wu"—the "martial" emperor who had spent his life on the battlefield.

How could *he* have possibly been this coquettish pretty boy?

Xuan Ji opened his mouth to speak, but his mind was swirling with too many questions. For a moment, he found himself at a loss for words.

"Your ancestor must have recovered my remains," Sheng Lingyuan continued, paying him no mind, "and preserved them using the ancient 'Life Essence Corpse Nurturing' technique."

His brain capacity pretty much gone, Xuan Ji could only repeat the unfamiliar term in a daze. "Life... Nurturing? *What* technique?!"

Sheng Lingyuan regarded Xuan Ji as a young yao brought up among humans, not unlike a human raised by wolves—intelligent, but short on common sense. He explained patiently. "It involves infusing a corpse with life essence by nurturing it with a living body. This method can be used to preserve an intact corpse indefinitely. For an incomplete one, exposure to vital spiritual energy over time may eventually restore the missing limbs. Perhaps you were too young to retain this knowledge when you received your clan's inheritance.

"As for why it took the form of a sword, that must be because your innate element is metal. 'Corpse Nurturing' requires the infusion of one's own life essence. While the preserved body remains linked with the living body, it will often present as one's lifebound weapon." At this, Sheng Lingyuan paused thought-

fully. "Though I also find it perplexing. I had assumed that your innate element was fire. It appears that I have misjudged. The intermingling among tribes has muddled these matters, I suppose."

Finally finding his voice again, Xuan Ji stuttered, "Then, if you've... erm, if you have been in my back the whole time... Then who was I fighting in the hospital...?"

Had that been some sort of counterfeit? Or perhaps some malicious ghost had been summoned by the Dark Descent and decided to impersonate the Sovereign of the Humans? After all, how could the Sovereign himself have possibly been a demon?!

"That was a Heartlace Puppet," Sheng Lingyuan replied. "Surely, you know what the 'Heartlace' spell is?"

Xuan Ji *did* know; the *Compendium* had already covered that lesson. But his eyelid twitched, and the shadow of unease passed over him. The *Compendium*'s original claim that the man was a Heartlace Puppet carved out of jade... hadn't actually been bullshit!

But if the jade puppet had attained the power of a Demonic Revenant, just what kind of being must have been dwelling within?

"That Heartlace Puppet had been an invaluable tool of mine in life. I often connected my spirit with it and used it as my eyes and ears. I left it with one of my guards—he must have been the one who buried it. The Dark Descent woke my soul, but not my true body. Thus, the ritual was completed through that vessel instead. When I suffered the lightning tribulation during the Dark Descent's backlash, it was only by virtue of you being near

with my true body that I was able to return to it. However, my spirit was shaken, and I failed to remember anything."

Sheng Lingyuan flexed his fingers, recalling how he hadn't wanted to answer the ritual summons at all. In fact, he had originally wanted to kill whomever was responsible for disturbing his rest.

Right... Then why *had* he opened his eyes and returned to the mortal realm?

He was on the verge of remembering when a sudden, sharp pain assaulted his temples. He frowned imperceptibly. It seemed that this body had been preserved a little too well—it even retained its former migraine affliction.

Meanwhile, Xuan Ji's heart slowly sank—this "Sovereign of the Humans" was definitely no human after all.

Emperor Wu had died three thousand years ago. Even if some ancient "Corpse Nurturing" technique could restore his body to its original state, that body should still have been no more than a fresh-looking corpse. When a person died, their soul dispersed; ghosts and spirits were naught but lies people told to comfort themselves. Bodies weren't like clothes that could be worn or discarded on a whim.

But Sheng Lingyuan had possessed the jade Heartlace Puppet. Then, after it was destroyed by lightning, he was forced back into his own corpse like a travelling wisp of smoke. The *Dongchuan Shaman Records* had clearly stated that only one kind of being could exist without a form: an immortal demon. Then... what had happened to turn the Sovereign of the Humans into a Demonic Revenant? What crucial details were missing from the

history books' dispassionate narratives?

Xuan Ji's usual cheeky grin vanished. He unconsciously held his breath as he asked, "That ancestor of mine... who was he to you?"

Why would he have gone to such lengths to preserve a corpse? Had he been an old friend?

The throbbing in Sheng Lingyuan's temples began to spread, filling his head with bone-splitting pain, yet he continued to smile. Slowly but coherently, he said, "My body is impervious to injury or the elements. You would be surprised at the usefulness of such a thing. Your ancestor was as creative as he was bold—a truly impressive character."

Xuan Ji felt a stab of malice from these words, and his gaze dimmed amidst the surrounding darkness. His rational side knew that this hurt was baseless—Emperor Wu was historically known as a lone wolf who had even slain his own teacher and kin. One could surmise that he'd had no one he could trust, friend or family. His cold speculations were consistent with that depiction. And even if there was malice in his words, it wasn't aimed at Xuan Ji—but at an ancestor from three thousand years ago who hadn't even left behind a single portrait.

The youth of today no longer held the same strong sense of clan loyalty, and Xuan Ji was no exception. Why should he care if a distant ancestor from generations past was insulted? And yet... Xuan Ji still felt a tug at his heartstrings—a suffocating sensation, as if some ambiguous sentiment had been betrayed.

A sudden commotion interrupted his angst. A disturbance arose from the foot of the mountain; someone was shouting

something in the shaman tongue.

Xuan Ji tidied away his inexplicable emotions and looked down the mountain path. A group of people were hiking up in a hurry, torches in hand. They surrounded a man who was carrying someone on his back. That man was shouting for help from a distance. Although Xuan Ji couldn't understand the language, he gathered as much from the situation.

The entire tribe was roused. Homes lining the hilly path lit their lanterns, and from afar, it looked as if a trail of lights climbed steadily from the foot of the hill up to the mid-slope. Half-asleep, residents threw on their robes and came out to see what was happening.

The shattering of the night's tranquillity was like an ominous metaphor.

"Is that..."

"That is me," Sheng Lingyuan said quietly. "The one leading is the chieftain from that time. The one on his back is me."

Just then, a rustling sound came from the bushes beside them. Xuan Ji looked down and saw a small head poking out from the foliage. It was a boy of about seven or eight—the peak age for mischief—staring up with wide eyes as round as grapes. The small braids in his hair were messy and dishevelled.

Xuan Ji took a step back. "That scared me... This kid looks just like that reanimated corpse from the cave!"

"Yes." Sheng Lingyuan's gaze settled on the boy and remained there for some time. "That is Arjin."

"What—"

At that moment, the chieftain passed by, and Xuan Ji got a

good look at the boy he was carrying.

He had long limbs that lacked the matching bulk, looking like a pile of bones holding up a head. Someone had wrapped him up in a large cloak, leaving only half of his pale face visible. Blood was dripping incessantly from the tips of his hanging fingers.

An old man dressed in elaborate attire came out of a wooden hut at the highest point of the hill. Xuan Ji figured that he must have been the spiritual leader of the shamans. The one they called the "Grand Sage", or something like that.

It was only when the torchlight illuminated the small house that Xuan Ji noticed: the door didn't have a knocker. Instead, there were two stones embedded within. They were identical to the ones in the door Sheng Lingyuan had created in the depths of their shared consciousness. No wonder Xuan Ji had never seen anything like that door before—it had been based on shaman architecture.

The old man from the hut came forward and took the injured child into his arms. The gathered shamans began whispering amongst themselves. Young Arjin, with his head full of tiny braids, squirmed through the adults' legs. Standing on tiptoe to peer through the crowd, he added to the clamour. "Is that the little prince? Really? Let me see, let me see!"

"You'd been injured?" Xuan Ji couldn't help but ask.

"A common occurrence," Sheng Lingyuan said indifferently as he stood on the fringes of the crowd, watching his battered younger self from afar. "My father died on the battlefield at the Crimson Abyss. The state fell, and the imperial city became the

yao capital. Humanity was weak, and people needed hope. So, a prophecy emerged—one most likely fabricated by my mother's skilled advisors. It claimed that 'a prince born among a million vengeful souls would carry the blood of his father and brothers, and with his own hand, vanquish the yao race.' "

"They were talking about..."

"Yes, about me. It was the kind of nonsense that only the most gullible and uneducated would believe, yet the commoners and the yao truly did believe it. From the day I was born, the King of the Yao saw me as a thorn in his side; I had been hunted by him all my life. When I was ten, I was separated from my teacher, betrayed by my kin, and chased all the way to Dongchuan by three great yao. All twelve of my guards perished. On the brink of death, I was saved by the shamans." Sheng Lingyuan glanced back at the hills lit by scattered lanterns. When he continued, his voice was slightly muffled. "The ancestral home of the shamans was a paradise removed from the world. It was in that sanctuary that I hid for six years."

As he spoke, the memories of that sanctuary began to slowly unfurl around them. Swept up in the flow, Sheng Lingyuan and Xuan Ji walked alongside time itself.

In the next memory, the young refugee prince was still recovering from his wounds. He leant against the window to rest his eyes when suddenly, a large bug flew in and landed squarely on his forehead, prompting mischievous giggles outside. Though this Sheng Lingyuan was only ten, he had been fleeing through a landscape of endless nightmares for a decade. Long since stripped of any childlike innocence, he had no intention of low-

ering himself to the level of such antics. He calmly plucked the strange insect from his face, released it through the window, and said in halting shaman tongue, "Stop that, or I shall tell your father again."

The snickering ceased at once. After a moment, a little head—Arjin's—popped out from between the branches of the nearby tree. He glared at Sheng Lingyuan before climbing down, his little band of followers in tow.

The young Arjin was fascinated by Sheng Lingyuan. He wanted to play with him but couldn't bring himself to take the first step towards friendship. As the chieftain's only son, Arjin had been spoiled rotten. Surrounded by adoration since birth, he was used to being the centre of attention. Even the other children would trail eagerly after him. The idea of setting aside his pride to gain someone's favour was simply unthinkable. As far as he was concerned, just pacing below someone's window was granting them a great honour; this human prince should have been begging to join his group.

To his surprise, however, the fallen prince refused to play along. Arjin was furious, but with his frustration grew his desire for what he couldn't have. The more Sheng Lingyuan ignored him, the more he wanted to assert his presence. He brought his posse to disturb the peace around the Grand Sage's little hut on a daily basis.

The young prince had long since developed a tempered disposition. Unshaken, he resorted to his trump card whenever he grew annoyed—"I'll tell your father." It worked without fail.

Soon, Arjin had to reckon with a sharp rise in scoldings from

his father. He found himself unilaterally torn between love and hate for the human prince—a teeth-gnashing situation.

By the time Sheng Lingyuan could move freely again, he had already mastered the basics of the shamans' speech and had begun studying their written language. The annals of history described Emperor Wu as a child prodigy, but they failed to mention that His Majesty could mimic speech faster than a parrot.

At first, Xuan Ji had assumed that Sheng Lingyuan was a natural genius born with incredible memory—someone worlds apart from the university students who could barely string two foreign words together after years of studying grammar. Only now did he realise that this skill was born out of necessity. In the years of the Great Upheaval, no one had the luxury of standardising speech. Languages varied wildly between tribes and regions, some barely even sharing the same foundations. For a boy constantly on the run through such a chaotic world, mastering languages quickly and blending into foreign environments was a matter of survival.

Even for Sheng Lingyuan, however, the shamans' writing system posed a unique challenge. Their characters, inscribed on the leaves of trees from the region, looked a bit like ancient Egyptian glyphs. They were composed of circles within circles, echoing the shapes in their architecture—a stark contrast to the sharp strokes of the Central Plains characters. The script had a deceptively simple charm, yet it was incredibly complex, bearing the deep roots of an ancient culture.

Beside the Grand Sage's wooden hut atop the hill was a structure surprisingly similar to a modern library. It was stocked with

countless collections of texts that anyone could browse freely—even outsiders from other races.

Xuan Ji was a modern man, but even he found the openness and sophistication of this ancient tribe astonishing. A short tour around Dongchuan through Retrograde had thoroughly upended his preconceived notions of the shamans.

The shaman tribe had given rise to the parasitic butterflies. Their tribesmen practised all manner of enigmatic sorcery, and even the name "shaman" exuded an esoteric air. Add to that the oddball Arjin, and Xuan Ji had only been able to relate the shamans to the stereotypical tribal witch doctors depicted in movies. He pictured people gathering around fires at night with obscured faces to plot their next curse.

Yet Dongchuan was anything but sinister. The rhythm of life in the shaman tribe was light-hearted and warm, the people laid-back. When they released their livestock to roam, they'd often wander off themselves for an afternoon nap. If any animals went missing, they could simply count on other tribesmen to bring them back in a few days. The children began their studies at the age of five or six, and everyone was literate. If there were no pressing matters, everyone gathered at the hilltop square in the evenings to relax. Even the chieftain and the Grand Sage joined them, sitting together with no concept of hierarchy. They sang, danced, told stories, bantered, and even debated primitive philosophical questions.

"This place could rival Athens in its heyday," Xuan Ji mused. "Why do they call themselves the shamans? That sounds a bit ominous, like they're all about their spells."

"In their own language, they call themselves 'the people who live in the forest halfway up the mountain'," Sheng Lingyuan said. " 'Shaman' is the name given to them by outsiders. Perhaps the ones who chose that name did so out of fear."

"The children also call you..."

" 'Lingyuan' ?"

"I thought you made that up."

"I couldn't even recall my real name, much less a false one." Sheng Lingyuan raised an eyebrow and smiled. "My formal name was rarely used. 'Lingyuan' was a childhood name bestowed by my elders. I am more accustomed to it; it slips off the tongue more easily."

It was said that the ancients placed great importance on the meaning of names, yet "Lingyuan" sounded anything but auspicious. Despite the tumultuous circumstances surrounding His Majesty's birth, he was given a name strongly associated with the Crimson Abyss. Xuan Ji thought to himself, *What kind of cruel elder would choose a name like that?*

They followed the young Sheng Lingyuan through the village, watching as the boy rested, read books, sought advice from the Grand Sage, and helped prepare herbal remedies. It was as if he were on holiday. The biggest of his worries during these days was Arjin's incessant pestering.

Retrograde had the power to trap someone in a cycle of memories, so Xuan Ji had braced himself for bloody scenes from the emperor's past. But instead, the two of them trailed after a ten-year-old boy through his daily routines, and it seemed like this would continue without end.

"Wait, Your Majesty." Xuan Ji hesitated for a moment but ultimately couldn't hold himself back. "You just said that if you have an unresolved memory, you might be trapped in it forever. Are we stuck now?"

Sheng Lingyuan glanced at him, his expression cold and indifferent.

Xuan Ji had a sudden realisation: the more Sheng Lingyuan's emotions fluctuated, the more distant he grew. If he hadn't known that the one refusing to wake from this boyhood reverie was Sheng Lingyuan himself, Xuan Ji might have thought the emperor was completely unflappable.

Could this man too succumb to weakness and fall into self-deception? Could he too be trapped in his own memories, endlessly looping through them?

For a fleeting moment, Xuan Ji saw Emperor Wu, the figure perched high atop his pedestal, as a man of flesh and blood like everyone else. The vulnerability of the strong was as soul-stirring as the courage of the cowardly. He couldn't help but soften his tone as he said, "But we still have to find a way out, right? You see..."

Before he could finish, Sheng Lingyuan gave a faint nod. "Hmm, you make a good point."

Xuan Ji shut his mouth; he hadn't even had a chance to deliver his speech.

"It is human nature to evade heavy truths; not even I am exempt," Sheng Lingyuan mused. Then, he said in a steady tone, "These events are from a life long past. They are too distant for me to grasp clearly now. Why don't we do this? Ask me about

anything you wish to know, and I will try to recall. Perhaps that will help us escape these trivial recollections."

"Your Majesty," Xuan Ji couldn't help but interrupt, "how could anything that entraps you be considered trivial?"

Sheng Lingyuan chuckled, baffled by the little yao's sentimentality. "Very well then. What would you have me do?"

In Sheng Lingyuan's presence, Xuan Ji was often struck by a sense of futility—as if he were wasting his energy on needless concern. Case in point: the way this mysterious emperor dissected his own vulnerabilities with such detachment made him seem almost inhuman. But before Xuan Ji could say another word, the scene around them began to crumble, as if responding to the question. Sheng Lingyuan must have composed himself, exerting remarkable self-control to discard the warm, mundane memories of his youth.

The peaceful shaman village shattered into countless fragments before their eyes like a toppled vase, and the two fell into a nightscape. Before Xuan Ji could regain his balance, the chieftain's back door creaked open. Young Arjin slipped out clutching a small bundle and headed straight down the mountain path, his face brimming with defiance. His left palm was red and swollen—he had likely just endured yet another beating after being reported for his mischief. Unable to bear it any longer, it seemed he had decided to run away from home.

"What did he do this time?" Xuan Ji asked.

"He stole the Grand Sage's 'Soul Shock' charm and slipped it under my pillow," Sheng Lingyuan explained. "Soul Shock can draw out the deepest fears hidden in one's heart, but it's actually

quite useful. The fear it evokes is but an illusion—see through it, and you are free. The Grand Sage used it as a cultivation tool, and I often made use of it myself later in life. But back then, the chieftain and the Grand Sage were very cautious with me because of my young age. When the chieftain found out, he flew into a rage and punished Arjin publicly. He couldn't withstand the humiliation and slipped away that very night."

Xuan Ji heard a soft rustling behind him. Turning around, he saw the young Sheng Lingyuan descend from a tall tree. He gazed at Arjin's retreating back and, after a moment of hesitation, followed after him.

"You..."

"I didn't sleep that night," Sheng Lingyuan admitted frankly. "Regardless of its benefits, Soul Shock's effects are powerful. It was my first encounter with it, and I was indeed too startled to close my eyes."

Despite their reclusive nature, the shamans had not been entirely isolated from the rest of the world. Occasionally, some disguised themselves as human commoners and ventured down the mountain to trade and procure supplies. Though Arjin had never gone with them, he clearly knew the way. Weeping, he slipped past the barrier formation at the base of the mountain, leaving the shaman tribe's protective bounds.

He had imagined the world beyond as a vast and wondrous land of towering mountains and winding rivers. Otherwise, why would a child from outside be treated so preciously?

However, the moment he stepped beyond the tribe's boundaries, he was faced with a reality harsh and cruel.

The shaman tribe was a neutral faction, but their mysterious sorcery had earned them the fear of both the humans and the yao. Although the yao had known that Sheng Lingyuan was hiding within the tribe, they dared not make a rash move. Unable to enter the village, the yao had been at a loss for months—and Arjin's flight was a gift delivered right to their doorstep. He was captured as soon as he left the barrier. That night, the yao held a joyful celebration. Hanging in a cage, Arjin was forced to watch as they feasted in front of him—on a banquet of human flesh.

Blood laced their liquor, and in a large cauldron simmered a broth of infant bones. Tiny skeletons bobbed up and down in the boiling water, some with shreds of flesh still clinging to them, showing traces of their original appearance. But the main course was a beautiful girl—eaten while she was still alive. Kept from dying by yao arts, she could only scream as her organs were cleaned out, and the meat was sliced off her body, given a quick simmer in the boiling broth, and eaten medium rare. After they were done, only bones were left on the girl's legs, but she remained unable to die, her face untouched.

The girl lost her mind, and Arjin, who had witnessed it all, was on the verge of losing his own. Together, they were thrown into a hut. Staring at him with hollow eyes, the girl cackled deep into the night while Arjin could only cry.

Forced to watch helplessly from the sidelines, Xuan Ji felt a shiver run down his back. He instinctively unfurled his flaming wings, but the moment they appeared, they were pushed back down by a cold hand impervious to fire.

"This is how it has always been. No need for such distress," Sheng Lingyuan said indifferently. "Were our positions reversed, humans would have been no kinder. These are debts from millennia past. It is of no concern to you, little yao."

"I'm not..." Xuan Ji almost blurted out that he wasn't a yao but swallowed the words back mid-sentence.

If he wasn't a yao, then what was he? He certainly wasn't a human. Xuan Ji was momentarily bewildered, and an inexplicable wave of loneliness engulfed him as he realised that he had no kin, no kind... no origin or story of his own.

The young Arjin cried so bitterly that it irked the yao guard. Annoyed, the guard raised a foot to kick him—just as a knife came slicing through the air and unceremoniously slashed the guard's throat.

The guard silently collapsed. Both Arjin, trapped in his misery, and Xuan Ji, gazing across time, looked numbly towards the newcomer. There stood the frail, sickly tattletale of a human prince. He wiped the blood off his face and caught the guard's body with practised movements. Then, he dragged it aside as though he had done so countless times.

Using a dagger etched with runes that countered yao arts, he effortlessly sliced through the iron cage holding Arjin. After pulling him out, he thrust a jar of spells into his hands. "Go."

Arjin stumbled, then ran a few steps before realising that Sheng Lingyuan hadn't followed. He turned back hastily; Sheng Lingyuan reached down and covered the girl's eyes, then whispered something in her ear. The girl shuddered, muttering in delirium.

After watching her for a moment, Sheng Lingyuan raised his blade. With a single slice, he severed the life-preserving spell, granting her peace. The girl was finally freed from the mire of existence; for a fleeting moment, her eyes became surprisingly clear.

Xuan Ji could only wonder—if reincarnation were real, would she dare to be reborn to the human world again?

Young Sheng Lingyuan released the girl's body and grabbed Arjin. "What are you standing there for?"

As Sheng Lingyuan pulled him along, Arjin continued to cry. Stifling a sob, he begged, "I... please... I want to cover her... *Ge*, can I just put something over her body...?"

This was the first time Arjin had addressed him as anything other than "Hey", "Annoying Brat", or "Tattletale". But Sheng Lingyuan neither loosened his grip nor turned his head. Instead, he whispered something in the shaman tongue.

Unable to understand the language, Xuan Ji asked, "What did you say to him?"

Sheng Lingyuan did not respond.

What he had said back then was, "One day, I will close the eyes of every wronged soul and lay to rest every abandoned bone." He had spoken with such unabashed conviction. Those words ended up haunting Arjin for the rest of his life.

The shamans had an ancestral oath: "Never leave Dongchuan." But after this night's events, the young chieftain-to-be was forever changed; his heart was already drifting towards the vast and merciless human world.

The shamans were not warmongers, and they were generally

mellow in temperament. This much was evident in the spells excavated from their burial mound. Almost all of them were paired with a reversal method so precise, it wouldn't even leave lingering aftereffects. This in itself was impressive. Stabbing someone to death was easy, but saving a stab victim was much harder—and counterspells followed the same principle. If the shamans hadn't foreseen the future and designed these spells specifically for the benefit of scammers thousands of years later, there was only one plausible explanation: they had crafted them for their own protection.

Even then, the two children had never been exposed to any serious spells in the first place. The ones in the random jar Sheng Lingyuan had brought along were essentially something shaman children used for pranks; in a fight, they were utterly useless. The two young boys were forced into hiding as they evaded the yao's savage pursuit, and their escape was anything but graceful. The villages they passed through were all deserted, and a gathering of crows was a sign of but one thing—headless, limbless corpses.

Young Arjin thought that crying was a sign of weakness, that tears held no value—certainly not the value of that girl's life—but he couldn't hold them back. As they trudged on, he kept his eyes fixed intently on Sheng Lingyuan's back, as if glaring hard enough might force back the tears. For the first time in his life, he had seen spilt blood and witnessed lives treated as less than weeds. It broke him. The fear he felt in the beginning eventually became fuel for his anger—a fury at the world's cruelty and at his own powerlessness.

But Xuan Ji wasn't the eight-year-old Arjin; he wasn't so easily moved to tears. After observing for a while, he asked, "This might be a rather disrespectful question but... Your Majesty, are these memories real?"

Sheng Lingyuan's gaze remained fixed on the two boys as they receded into the distance. Then, he turned to Xuan Ji with an expression that said, *Why do you ask?*

"You said that the King of the Yao ordered your capture himself. And the yao knew you'd taken refuge in shaman territory, which was difficult for them to infiltrate, right? The objective was a crucial target—Your Majesty yourself. And the opponents were particularly formidable—the shaman clan. Wouldn't a competent commander have sent their most reliable forces? You said you'd been chased by three great yao earlier. I'm not good with history—or even common sense—so I don't really get what a 'great yao' is. But since you lost all twelve guards fleeing from them, they must have been quite formidable. You and Arjin both became big shots later, but back then you were still a couple of half-pints. All you had with you were prank tools, and yet you both managed to escape? That seems a little hard to believe."

Sheng Lingyuan stopped a few steps ahead and scrutinised him with an unreadable expression. "What are you trying to say?"

Dressed in tattered rags and muddy rolled-up jeans, Xuan Ji looked like a rebellious punk. The words he used to address Sheng Lingyuan were respectful, but his tone was ruthlessly sharp. His smiling eyes were brimming with vigilance.

"I'm just voicing my doubts, is all." Xuan Ji smiled, unflinchingly meeting Sheng Lingyuan's gaze. "Maybe the yao had upset stomachs that day, or maybe they happened to be allergic to shaman sorcery or something."

Sheng Lingyuan thought to himself, *This little brat acts hot-headed but has an ice-cold heart. He's as sly as they come. Any warmth he has must be fuel for his wings.*

Not bad at all.

Those with too warm a heart never grew up—just like Arjin. Nothing good ever came of it.

"Does history remember the name of my teacher?" Sheng Lingyuan asked unexpectedly.

"Your teacher..." The question jogged Xuan Ji's memory. "Oh, yeah. He was quite famous. All the kids learn about him in history class. 'Dan Li, Imperial Preceptor, face fair as a maiden's, pure of diet. He served Emperor Wu from a young age and acted as his tactical advisor for many years. When the nation was restored, he served as chancellor, and five years later, he was behea—' "

That last line had come up in the exam, and Xuan Ji almost recited it on auto-pilot before remembering whom he was speaking to. He bit down on his tongue just in time.

Five years later, he was beheaded in public.

Right. Emperor Wu's "illustrious achievements" had included the slaying of his own teacher.

Sheng Lingyuan's eyes were dark and still. They reflected the surrounding light like a sheet of ice reflected flames.

Realising his slip up, Xuan Ji quickly swept that subject under

the carpet. "Ah... well, anyway, was he really as good-looking as they say? You wouldn't believe it, but just that line about his face being as fair as a maiden's would keep his IP popular for at least five more centuries. I've seen so many TV dramas about him, and each one had him marrying some different Mary Sue. I got so lost, I don't even know who his actual wife was supposed to be anymore."

"What is 'ai... pi...'?" Sheng Lingyuan could barely understand a word of what was said. But when he saw the shifty glint in Xuan Ji's eyes, he shook his head, and his own eyes curved slightly—the little yao must have been going off about something frivolous again. "Dan Li never married. He only had one female confidante by his side, though it would not be proper for me to speak her name. But no, it was not 'Su' or anything similar... Is it a common pastime now to fabricate stories about historical figures?"

Xuan Ji saw his chance and took it. "Oh, don't worry. The gossip mill hasn't turned its venom on you yet."

Sheng Lingyuan's eyes twitched, caught between perplexity and amusement.

"Because the history books said you were, uh... mighty and powerful."

Nearly ten feet tall, like the Pagoda-wielding Heavenly King, chopping down foes as if they were melons.

"You, uh... exude such integrity that it repels all rumours."

One look at your portrait could forever rob a maiden of the spring in her step.

For once, Sheng Lingyuan was left momentarily speechless.

"I'm... glad to have been spared." He smiled, and the coldness in his gaze seemed to thaw completely.

Sheng Lingyuan spoke about the mentor he had personally executed as if he were discussing his form teacher during lunch break. Xuan Ji couldn't help but question the accuracy of the historical records—Emperor Wu didn't have a wrinkly face or a bushy beard... Was it possible that the rumours about him killing his family and teacher had also been exaggerated for sensationalism?

"The Imperial Preceptor, Dan Li—what kind of person was he?"

Sheng Lingyuan squinted into the distance. As soon as he heard the question, the creases of amusement at the corners of his eyes melted away. He resumed speaking in that casual, indifferent tone. "He had remarkable talent in both the arts and military affairs. I grew up by his side, as he raised and trained me personally. Even after his death, people continued to build shrines for him. They worshipped him as a deity. I had to issue an edict banning such behaviour, and even then, many defied it. Thus, I imposed a harsh penalty—anyone caught depicting Dan Li's likeness would be deemed guilty of treason and have his entire clan executed."

A chilly wind swept through the valley, sending shivers down Xuan Ji's spine.

Sheng Lingyuan stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze fixed on the distant valley. The landscape began to collapse, signifying the slipping of his memories into even darker recesses, but his expression remained unchanged. "You

think our escape from the yao had been far too easy? Indeed—if I am not mistaken, Dan Li should have been nearby. After all the effort he put into raising me, of course he wouldn't have let me die."

Xuan Ji was so surprised, all propriety went right out the window. "Shit, you can't mean..."

"I thought I had been cornered as I fled to the shaman tribe, clutching the nameplates of the twelve loyal guards who had died for me. But it turned out that every danger I faced had been carefully planned." Sheng Lingyuan's lips curved upwards, but there was no humour in his eyes. "Young one, allow me to teach you something—in this world, there is no such thing as coincidence."

Not only was His Majesty a staunch atheist—but also a conspiracy theorist.

However, Xuan Ji had no time to dwell on these matters as the world collapsed beneath their feet. He grabbed hold of Sheng Lingyuan, and the two of them plummeted further into the depths. Xuan Ji was overtaken by weightlessness, but he resisted the urge to spread his wings and push against the memory space. In his mind, an outline of the whole sequence of events had already begun to take shape—

During the war, humans had outnumbered the yao, but they lacked a core fighting force. Human cultivators required years of training and powerful artefacts—and even then, they could barely contend with the yao. For ordinary people, an encounter with yao meant certain death. Even a minor yao could have easily decimated an entire village with a single breath of toxic air.

At that time, the royal family had been in disarray, and humanity was left without a leader. Desperate, the people placed their hopes on a vague, idealistic prophecy—even if their promised saviour was just a ten-year-old child. Humanity's only chance at turning the tide hinged on securing every possible ally. The shamans were crucial. Not only did the shamans possess immense strength, but they could create special artefacts imbued with spells that even ordinary people were able to wield as weapons.

The problem was that the shamans, while amicable, never left Dongchuan. They were peaceful, withdrawn, and harboured no ambitions for power. They weren't swayed by the rewards King Ping had offered them—much less the scraps of the fallen humans, reduced to vagrants after their nation's destruction. Dongchuan was a natural fortress of mountains and ravines, sealed away from the outside world by powerful barriers. No matter how fierce the carnage outside, the shamans could simply hide away in their secluded stronghold. Why would they involve themselves in someone else's fight?

Neither bribes nor threats had been effective, so Dan Li devised a third approach: a decoy. The frail and lost ten-year-old prince would appear at their doorstep on his last legs. Knowing the shamans' nature, they would never leave an innocent child to die. And as soon as that child entered their territory, the shamans would be forced to put one foot in humanity's camp.

All that existed in the eyes of the powerful were costs and benefits, but genuine feelings still resided within the young hearts. In times of turmoil, sincerity was a blade most rare and

powerful.

Behind every incidental line written in the history books lay uncountably many hidden machinations.

Chapter 12

Within the space of Retrograde, countless scenes flew by. Arjin had chosen the figure he wanted to follow, and from that point on, he began to change. The younger generation of shamans rallied around him, filled with the vigour of youth. Unlike their forebears who embraced peace, they longed to leave their mark upon the world.

After six years of bitter struggle, the humans finally broke through the yao encirclement around Dongchuan and sent an escort to welcome their lost prince home. And after a fierce quarrel with his chieftain father, Arjin resolutely led his rebellious young followers away to chase after a dream of pacifying the four seas.

The scenes flashing before Xuan Ji's eyes were disordered, chaotic, and far from pleasant. It was clear that things had not been easy in the beginning.

After leaving Dongchuan, Sheng Lingyuan formally ascended the throne at the age of sixteen. By then, he had largely grown into an adult. Though he was still thin from his years of hard-

ship, his features and build had come to closely resemble the man now standing beside Xuan Ji. And yet, the Sheng Lingyuan of that era still felt like an entirely different person. The young emperor wore exhaustion like a second skin, and his face was rarely clean when he wasn't meeting with someone. He always looked as if he could fall asleep leaning against his sword at any moment. A bit of stubble had started growing on his upper lip. He occasionally shaved it off with the same blade he'd just used to cut someone down—if he even remembered. With such a sloppy appearance, it was little wonder he'd left behind portraits akin to an angry yaksha. But when he opened his eyes, they shone with a light that could weather any storm—a brightness so fierce, it took Xuan Ji's breath away.

It was those eyes that drew others to follow him.

Xuan Ji felt his heart clench when he met that gaze. The young emperor hurried away, and Xuan Ji instinctively reached out to stop him. But the two belonged to different spaces and times; they passed right through each other.

What am I doing? Xuan Ji relaxed his fingers.

Just then, they finally landed on solid ground, and Xuan Ji returned to his senses. He spotted Arjin running after Sheng Lingyuan, the braids in his hair bouncing behind him. The shaman boy was only fourteen, and he seemed to lag behind his peers in growth, barely reaching Xuan Ji's shoulder. With his lively gait, he looked more like a secondary schooler rushing to PE class—one possibly in need of juvenile protection.

"Isn't Arjin still just a kid? And he's already the chieftain?"

"Ah." Sheng Lingyuan laughed coldly. "That is a good ques-

tion."

The scene before Xuan Ji shattered once again. He felt a jolt from the ground beneath him, accompanied by a deafening scream.

"Let me go! Get out of my way!" Arjin's eyes were blood-red. Not even four young shamans could hold him back as he shoved his way out of a tent.

"Arjin, don't be rash!"

Arjin had just charged out when a galloping horse came to an abrupt halt right in front of him. It raised its forelegs so high, the rider was nearly thrown off. That rider was none other than the young Sovereign of the Humans. Blood seeped faintly through the bandages around his chest; he must have been wounded in some encounter. He stumbled as he dismounted, clutching the reins tightly to stay upright.

"*Ge*, they're lying... aren't they?" Arjin choked out. His eyes were so red, he looked ready to cry blood.

Sheng Lingyuan's pale lips moved, but no sound came out.

"They're lying! They scorn me, so they made up some nonsense to trick me! Right?!"

Young Sheng Lingyuan suddenly lowered his head, his handsome features distorted by sharp pain. Gritting his teeth, he forced out a raspy answer, "Half a month ago... the letter you sent to the tribe passed through Chuanxi... It was intercepted by the flying rat tribe. The messenger was turned into a human-skin puppet and sent into the village. The chieftain... the chieftain momentarily lowered his guard... Arjin!"

Arjin swayed before collapsing to his knees.

The young emperor and the Revenant from millennia in the future reached out in unison. One hand quakingly wrapped itself around the back of Arjin's neck while the other gently rested on his head. Across time, the two Sheng Lingyuans' hands met—the same bones, the same flesh. Yet, the older hand was refined and pristine, like a cold and beautiful ice sculpture, while the younger one was marred by countless scars and hardened calluses. A red line left by the horse reins cut across its palm, suggesting an almost tangible warmth.

The sight of their hands together was jarring, even to the Revenant himself. He swiftly withdrew.

"It was the New Year holiday." Having steadied himself, Sheng Lingyuan turned to Xuan Ji again. "That is, the human New Year, which meant nothing to the shamans. But they were curious people, and they loved a good celebration. If there was ever a festival, they would join in for a drink. There wasn't much to do in the camp, and after sharing a few rounds, even the soldiers who were wrestling or sparring grew tired. Some began to play drums and sing. One young soldier cried as he sang a folk tune from his home—his entire family had died in the war, and he had nowhere left to return to. Arjin was silent that whole night. When he retired to his tent, he wrote a letter home—the first one since he had left. He secretly entrusted it to a confidante he'd had absolute faith in. He kept it secret even from me, and I only learnt of it later. He must not have wanted me to think him weak. But it turned out to have been a grave mistake."

"Who was that person he trusted?" asked the perceptive Xuan Ji.

Sheng Lingyuan sighed softly and tucked his hands into the sleeves woven from dried vines. "It appears you have already figured it out.

"Arjin had been too hasty when he led his people away with me. They barely knew the human language and were thoroughly unprepared for the outside world. As I had just succeeded the throne, I was overwhelmed with matters that needed my attention. I had no time to look after Arjin myself, so that responsibility fell to my meticulous and attentive Imperial Preceptor, Dan Li. Arjin took to him immediately. He once confided in me that Dan Li strongly reminded him of the Grand Sage, that he'd felt safe and assured in his presence. Like me, he took to calling him 'Teacher'."

Xuan Ji suddenly became aware of something amiss. For better or worse, this "Dan Li" must have been someone extremely important. And yet, he hadn't made a single appearance in Sheng Lingyuan's memories. In Retrograde's realm, every detail was richly textured, each face and gesture strikingly clear. Xuan Ji had already become familiar with the young emperor's attendants, prominent ministers, and generals—even some of the lively shamans by Arjin's side. Yet, amidst all of these figures, why was there no sign of Dan Li?

According to His Majesty, Dan Li ought to have been close with both him and Arjin. But in a world without the internet, how could anyone have forged strong bonds without physically spending time together?

Numerous possibilities flashed through Xuan Ji's mind. With a start, his gaze suddenly sharpened, and he shoved his hands

into his pockets. A line from the *Dongchuan Shaman Records*' description of Demonic Revenants surfaced in his thoughts: "Demons devour the heart; trust them not."

Carefully maintaining his poker face, Xuan Ji said, "So the old chieftain was killed because of that letter, and then Arjin succeeded. With deep enmity sealed between the shamans and the yao, the entire tribe officially aligned themselves with your cause. In what year did all of that happen?"

"In the thirty-first year of King Ping's rule."

This aligned with the history Xuan Ji was familiar with. Although Emperor Wu had taken the throne much earlier, he only changed the dynastic name after the nation had been restored. Until then, the people continued using the calendar from the former reign. Of those years, the thirty-first was especially significant: historical records showed that the young emperor, then only eighteen, saw many tribes and clans pledging their allegiance to him. The fragmented human race finally united under a new sovereign's banner, marking a pivotal point in reversing the Great Upheaval chaos.

The records spoke of what had happened—but not *how*. Back when Xuan Ji had been studying this part, he'd found it baffling. In a time without advertisements or social media, how had an eighteen-year-old rallied such widespread support? Prior to that point, he hadn't even had any remarkable achievements to his name.

But now, Xuan Ji realised that the answer lay in the influential shaman tribe's support. The mysterious and powerful shamans had always been secluded—yet they suddenly declared

their support for the humans. It was a clear sign that the winds were changing. When the other tribes found out, they must have assumed the shamans had insider information. Afraid of missing out, they flocked to follow suit.

If Dan Li had orchestrated all this himself, then the guy was indeed a legendary character with a big-ticket IP!

"So what happened after Arjin succeeded the tribe? How did mutual support turn into internal strife?"

Sheng Lingyuan lifted his head and gazed into the faraway sky. A shooting star tore across the heavens, violently slicing through the night as it plummeted to the horizon, shattering the scene around them once more.

No flower blooms eternally—and no one enjoys good fortune forever. While in dire straits, they were brothers in need. But once their position grew stronger, it was only natural that disputes would arise.

The following years passed by quickly, just as turbulent as those that came before. The shamans' inscrutable sorcery inspired fear in others. Arjin could sense their wariness and kept his distance. Though he was generally easy-going, he was stubborn and unwilling to tolerate grievance or loss. Spoiled by his tribe since childhood, he suddenly found himself shouldering the immense burden of vengeance and the expectations of his people. The crushing weight nearly broke him, but his stubborn pride wouldn't allow him to show others that he was struggling. He forced himself to wear a facade every day. Over time, he became gloomy, eccentric, and increasingly unapproachable.

Aside from eating, drinking, and producing waste, humans

possessed a unique talent for infighting, having complaint down to an art. Their repertoire of techniques included the "insidious accusation", designed to strike at the emperor's raw nerves with fine precision; the "moral blackmail", wherein they would grovel and cry with a readiness to break their skulls at his feet; and the "choir plea", a method of banding together and repeating their grievances until the young monarch's ears grew calluses. Soon, the mere mention of Arjin's name brought a litany of charges to Sheng Lingyuan's mind.

"Your Majesty, the shaman tribe is our vassal. How can Chieftain Arjin address you by name? Such disrespect!"

Though Sheng Lingyuan had hidden his ruthlessness behind a smiling facade since he was a boy, he had yet to learn true restraint. In his youth, he acted forcefully. Upon hearing such a petty and ridiculous accusation, he smiled faintly and replied, "It's not as if my name were something like 'Dog Scraps'. It is presentable enough. If someone wishes to address me by it, I will happily respond."

"Your Majesty! The shaman chieftain is a drunkard and a lecher. In his inebriation, he has insulted our meritorious officials!"

Not only a drunkard, but a lecher too? The young emperor's eye twitched. He tried to think, but he couldn't figure out which of his "meritorious officials" possessed a manner worthy of such affronts. Helpless, he tactfully replied, "If there are any grievances, I will address them personally. But don't take advantage of Arjin when he has had too much to drink."

"Your Majesty! A young shaman injured Physician Zheng's

son with a malignant curse. But instead of punishing the culprit, Chieftain Arjin lashed out at the victim!"

Sheng Lingyuan assured the petitioner that the matter would be handled with due seriousness, then summoned both the troublemaking brat and his instigator. The kid and Arjin each received ten strikes to the palm.

But afterwards, he went out to comfort Arjin in secret. That night happened to be the shaman tribe's annual "Purification Festival". On that night, the shaman children wore wooden masks and, guided by their elders, wandered under the moonlight. They travelled from south to north, singing purification songs to pray for health and peace in the coming year. Though Arjin was still young, he had been regarded as an adult ever since he took on the role of chieftain; he no longer needed to wear a mask. However, his emperor of a brother had personally carved one for him. Wearing plain clothes, that elder brother accompanied him for a whole mile through the brightly lit festival night until state affairs pulled him away.

"Your Majesty, Arjin defied military orders! He insisted on razing a yao settlement even though the enemy had already surrendered! Such an act not only defies the will of Heaven but also tarnishes our reputation. In the future, our enemies will insist on fighting to the death, costing countless soldiers their lives. Please, Your Majesty!"

Hearing the accusation, Sheng Lingyuan finally lifted his gaze from his scroll. He looked at the human general kneeling before him and remained silent for a while before saying, "Summon Arjin."

The human general thought that the wool the shamans had pulled over the young ruler's eyes had finally been lifted, and he raised his head hopefully. But Sheng Lingyuan set his brush down with a soft *click* and said in a low voice, "Do not spread word of this matter. Tell the public... Tell them that the defending yao faked their surrender with malicious intent, and Arjin uncovered their plot. Let it serve as a warning to others."

The general's face turned completely ashen.

But the young emperor was unaware of his subject's fury. Deep in thought, he continued, "As for the half-yao who come to pledge their allegiance to our cause, *zhen* promised them protection. But... even if they have been cast out by the yao, they still carry yao blood. When they arrive, make sure they stay out of sight—especially of the shamans'."

The general stomped his feet, convinced that the young monarch had been bewitched by shaman curses. Fuming with anger, he stormed out of the room.

Xuan Ji was clearly just observing, but for some reason, he suddenly found himself empathising with the human officials whose complaints were repeatedly dismissed. Inexplicable frustration welled up in his chest. *How could he be so biased?* Yet almost as quickly, he snapped out of it, bewildered by his own irritation. *What does this even have to do with me?*

From a young age, Sheng Lingyuan had carved a bloody path through life with unyielding determination. He was accustomed to flaunting his strength. After ascending the throne, he continued to act wilfully, oblivious to the backlash his capricious favouritism could provoke. By the time he realised, it was too late.

"Dan Li warned me twice," the present-day Sheng Lingyuan remarked, his gaze fixed critically on his younger self. "The first time, he told me that I was giving the shamans too much. I didn't listen. The second time, he said that Arjin's hostility towards the yao was excessive—acceptable during wartime, but bound to bring disaster once peace was restored. But I thought: how could anyone remain calm over the murder of his own father? So I ignored him again."

"But the yao weren't exactly a singular tribe," Xuan Ji interjected, sounding unexpectedly familiar with the state of affairs. "They were a loose collective of flying beasts and land animals. Among them were those willing to follow the King of the Yao to war and those who'd opposed him from the start. Others got tired as the conflict went on and just wanted to go home to the mountains and forests to rest. There were even the half-yao mixbloods who were never really accepted by pureblood yao. As the war dragged on, many yao and half-yao ended up siding with the humans. Their support was something you all desperately wanted—but not Arjin, right?"

Arjin had never truly grown up; in his world, everything was either black or white.

"To give the half-yao who surrendered a place to go, I ordered the establishment of the 'Thirteenth Division', the predecessor of the Bureau of Peace. I had intended to keep it hidden from Arjin, but too many people were eager to see him meet a bad end. Someone leaked the information the very next day. The moment Arjin found out, he deserted his post on the front lines and came back to confront me."

"What did you promise me? Say it!" roared the Arjin of memory. "You said you'd help me get revenge! And now you're laughing and drinking with those beasts? *You liar!*"

Arjin had indeed been spoiled. He had grown up treating the Sovereign of the Humans as his elder brother. His mouth may have parroted the way others called him "Your Majesty", but deep down, he had never taken that address seriously. Shouting at an elder brother might have earned him a slap or two. But speaking so freely to the emperor—the ruler of so many races and tribes—was an offence bordering on treason.

Sheng Lingyuan bore no real temper against him, but there were too many considerations to weigh. At such a critical juncture, the dignity of the Sovereign of the Humans could not be tarnished, else his authority would be at stake. Before anyone else could react, he took the opportunity to subdue the raging Arjin himself—and ordered his imprisonment. He had planned to wait until the dead of night, when he could momentarily shed the armour of "His Majesty" and return to appease Arjin as simply "Lingyuan".

Arjin was escorted away amid the chaos, and the young Sheng Lingyuan's chest ached from anger. From behind a curtain came a voice: "Rest assured, Your Majesty. When the young chieftain barged in, I had already dismissed the other officials. Not many overheard."

The voice sent a chill down Xuan Ji's spine. He wasn't sure if he had imagined the eerily familiar aura within it—an aura of death.

The ashen-faced young emperor tossed aside his facade of

stern authority, revealing helpless fatigue. "Teacher," he called out softly.

The figure remained hidden behind the curtain, appearing as but a dim silhouette. He addressed Sheng Lingyuan with composure. "The young chieftain's hostility towards the yao will eventually become a problem. I have warned you about this, Your Majesty."

The young Sheng Lingyuan sighed. "*Zhen* understa—I understand. But the old chieftain... Teacher, what are you doing?"

The shadow behind the curtain abruptly knelt, pressing his head to the ground. "Your Majesty, there is one more thing you may not be aware of."

Both Xuan Ji and the Sheng Lingyuan from the memory moved towards the curtain. The young emperor intended to help his teacher to his feet, while Xuan Ji was itching to see what this Dan Li actually looked like.

But at that moment, the present-day Sheng Lingyuan beside him groaned in pain, and the memory abruptly shattered. Squeezing his temples hard, he staggered back a step and stumbled into Xuan Ji. Xuan Ji instinctively moved to catch him and was startled by the realness of his body—warm and tangible, just like the flesh-and-blood humans who brushed against him daily on the bus or the underground.

"Are you..."

"I have grown accustomed to being a wandering ghost. To put human skin back on is... a little... ugh..." Sheng Lingyuan managed to squeeze out a few words as he attempted to prop himself up on Xuan Ji's arm. His fingers were trembling and

clammy with cold sweat.

Xuan Ji suddenly remembered an unofficial historical account that speculated about the drastic change in temperament Emperor Wu had undergone in his later years. The text proposed that his violence and aggression had been caused by illness, suggesting symptoms such as chronic fatigue, recurrent insomnia, constant tinnitus, and frequent migraines. Xuan Ji had dismissed the claim as baseless fiction at the time. But now, he wondered... could there have been some truth to it after all?

Perhaps because of the sudden headache, the Retrograde scenes from Sheng Lingyuan's memory began to blur. The surroundings grew chaotic. Countless people flickered in and out of view, accompanied by a cacophony of shouting, crying, arguing...

"Your Majesty!" A distant voice rang out. Supported by Xuan Ji's arms, Sheng Lingyuan instinctively turned his head as though that voice had physically stabbed him. "Chieftain Arjin has escaped from prison!"

With a thud, Xuan Ji's feet hit solid ground again. A new memory replaced the old one, plunging them into a familiar darkness. Xuan Ji recognised this place—they had returned to the shaman burial ground. But the burial ground of memory was still just a cave, not yet littered with bones of the dead. Xuan Ji could hear Sheng Lingyuan's pained, stifled breaths. Then, the weight in his arms lightened as Sheng Lingyuan struggled free, swaying slightly before managing to steady himself.

"So when Dan Li suddenly knelt earlier, what did he say?" Xuan Ji asked.

Sheng Lingyuan was silent for a moment. "He confessed the truth about the former shaman chieftain's death. He had been the one who sent the messenger with Arjin's letter. The so-called flying rat tribe had never existed, and that 'messenger' was nothing more than a human-skin puppet from the start. Dan Li said that there had been no other choice. Without obtaining the shamans' support, the whole of humanity would have faced annihilation. He'd had no other options..."

The warmth from Sheng Lingyuan's body lingered fleetingly on Xuan Ji's palms. But the breeze within the cave soon carried it away, leaving behind only cold. He sighed. "Your Majesty, your oh-so-great, great men had such cold hands and such wicked hearts. Did Arjin know about this?"

"When he escaped, no, he did not know. At the time, he was merely throwing a tantrum. I had spoiled Arjin too much... he became too headstrong. After he fled, he issued a command to withdraw all shaman forces from the front lines. In his agitated state, he dispelled the shaman formations on the battlefield and led his men back to Dongchuan. The yao that had been pushed back seized the opportunity to launch a counterattack. Our soldiers were forced to retreat twenty miles. Two cities and over a dozen villages fell into yao hands. To vent their fury, the yao massacred the civilians. Almost no one survived."

Xuan Ji felt a chill crawl up his spine. "But why were there still civilians near the front lines? Why hadn't they been evacuated?"

"Hah. After twenty years of war, there was nowhere left for people to go. Where could they flee?" Sheng Lingyuan chuckled

coldly as he walked through the cave. His voice was faint, but his steps were steady. "Back then, the shamans had been tasked with guarding the southeast, and they protected the area with their inscrutable sorcery. Many displaced humans sought refuge with them. The shamans and the humans mingled, harmoniously sharing clothing, language, and customs. Some shaman settlements had even been turned into villages where the humans could farm again. That year, the humans had a bountiful harvest and offered half of it to the shaman soldiers."

But then, the young and reckless shaman chieftain abandoned them.

In the burial ground of memory, Sheng Lingyuan's sharply chiselled profile was illuminated by the dim, shifting light. "Shamans loved fresh fruit; Arjin especially loved pears. To express their gratitude, the humans in the villages piled their grains and fruit outside the shamans' military tents. When we reclaimed the area and recovered the dead, the grains had been mixed inseparably with dirt. The villagers' carefully selected fruits had been trampled to mush under iron-clad hooves and soaked in their blood. An old woman was disembowelled after her death and feasted on by man-eating yao until all that remained were bits of broken bone. Those beasts are picky eaters; they rarely go for old and tough meat. Do you know why they did that?"

Xuan Ji caught a trace of malice in the man's persisting smile and suddenly realised that these words were not meant for him. They were meant for the Demonic Revenant Arjin outside the Retrograde spell.

"Because"—As he spoke, Sheng Lingyuan's voice grew gentler

yet more merciless—"she had been carrying a jar of pear blossom honey intended for the young chieftain. But the jar broke, and the honey spilt all over her. It must have been very sweet."

What the hell was all this? Xuan Ji felt his head throb just from listening to it.

"Everyone was incensed, demanding that I deal with Arjin. The shamans were branded traitors to humanity, and I had to forcibly quell the dissent. I rushed to Dongchuan overnight. But I was still too late. By the time I arrived, the humans and half-yao long harbouring grievances against Arjin had already laid siege to Dongchuan. The secrets behind many of the shaman tribe's formations and spells had been disclosed when Arjin allied with humanity; Dongchuan's defences were weak and easy to breach. Once the barrier was broken, a group of yao took advantage of the chaos... Ah, yes, there it is. Can you hear it?"

Xuan Ji quickly looked up. Outside the cave echoed the cries of battle, and gravel rained down from the quaking rock walls around them.

"If it were you, what would you have done?" Sheng Lingyuan said softly.

Xuan Ji wasn't sure if Sheng Lingyuan was asking him—or addressing someone who had been silently watching them all along, hidden in the void. He gazed towards the cave entrance. In the memory, this place was not yet a tomb—nor was it buried underground. Faint light filtered in from outside, casting Sheng Lingyuan's face into stark halves of light and dark, highlighting the sharp and seamless lines of bone beneath his flesh.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the entrance, followed by a

hoarse cry in the shaman tongue.

The pain in Sheng Lingyuan's head only grew. Wincing, he pressed his forehead against the icy rock wall.

"What did he say?" Xuan Ji asked.

" 'The altar has been opened.' " Sheng Lingyuan's voice was somewhat muffled as he answered. " 'The elders and children are to enter first.' "

"The 'altar'?"

"For the shamans, it had been a forbidden ground." Sheng Lingyuan's voice was nearly drowned out by a cacophony of footsteps and panicked cries. The terrified shamans surged into the cave like animals driven by a flood, brushing past the onlookers from millennia hence. "Sealed within were ancient secrets and curses that had no counterspells. The formation at the altar was far more intricate than Dongchuan's barrier. The altar was dedicated to the shamans' mountain god. They revered the mountains and rivers and saw the mountain god as their mother—one who safeguarded their malice and embraced everything about her children."

Piercing cries echoed from the entrance once more. This time, no translation was necessary—Xuan Ji could guess that someone was urging the retreating tribespeople to hurry. Perhaps after hearing so much of the shaman tongue within Retrograde, Xuan Ji was slowly starting to discern its pronunciation and intonation. But the shaman's words were abruptly cut off by a scream, and the thick, metallic scent of blood blew into the cave. The roar of a beast sounded dangerously close.

A shaman child stumbled and fell at Xuan Ji's feet. He in-

stinctively reached out, only for his hand to pass right through the child's shoulder. He froze and awkwardly withdrew his hand before looking up. "Dongchuan was under siege, and the barrier formation was broken. The shamans could barely hold out, so they retreated to the altar to hide. To wait for..."

"To wait for me," Sheng Lingyuan whispered.

Whenever Arjin got into conflicts, Sheng Lingyuan couldn't bring himself to reprimand him. He always found a way to smooth things over.

Over time, Arjin had come to see this as a given.

As long as they could hold out long enough, Lingyuan would come. As long as Lingyuan was there, the humans who turned against them would withdraw, and they would have the chance to deal with the opportunistic yao scoundrels.

Lingyuan was omnipotent, like the mountain god they worshipped at the altar. He was both Arjin's faith and the elder brother who had guided him along the moonlit path...

"To wait for me to save him."

Under Arjin's leadership, the warriors of the shaman tribe risked their lives to buy enough time for their people to escape to the altar. The once-tranquil lands of Dongchuan were set ablaze by the flames of war. Fire swept through the mountains and the fields, consuming the round wooden huts, the vast forests, the squares once filled with song and dance, and even the boundless starlit sky...

All were engulfed by the raging fire.

"Chieftain, watch out!"

Arjin had been guarding the rear. Hearing the warning, he

jumped off his horse without hesitation. A colossal serpent immediately gave chase, its gaping maw almost half as wide as the cave entrance. The stench of blood filled the air as the beast bit through Arjin's horse at the midsection. Its forelegs continued their galloping motion even as its entrails littered the ground.

Biting his index finger to draw blood, Arjin swiftly traced a peculiar symbol in the air and thrust it towards the serpent. The blood rune collided with the serpent's head, throwing both Arjin and the beast backwards. The serpent crashed through a tree trunk over a metre thick while Arjin was hurled into the cave.

The shaman standing guard at the entrance immediately activated a mechanism. The mouth of the cave rumbled as the entire altar began to descend. "Quickly! Seal the entrance!"

It was only then that Xuan Ji realised: the "burial mound" hadn't been buried by tectonic shifts, but by a mechanism designed to lower the entire cave from within. The serpent outside was unwilling to let them go, repeatedly slamming its body against the mountainside. Each impact reverberated with a terrifying din.

Several shamans rushed to help the exhausted Arjin to his feet.

"Chieftain, it's not safe to stay out here!"

Arjin panted heavily. "Our people..."

"All forty thousand made it inside, Chieftain. Please don't worry!" Reassuring him, one of his guards bent down, lifted Arjin to his back, and hurriedly carried him deeper into the cave.

One after another, stone doors fell behind them, cutting off the cacophony outside. The surviving shamans exchanged un-

easy glances, their relief mingled with lingering fear.

The altar's core—the cavern that would later house Arjin's coffin—was strictly off-limits. The tribespeople rested in the outer chambers, their quiet sobs intermingling with whispered words of comfort.

After catching his breath, Arjin made his way to the mouth of the forbidden cavern. It was sealed by those eerie, white "bleeding" flowers. Only through the gaps in their tightly interwoven vines could one glimpse the faint shimmer of light reflecting off water. Arjin's knees buckled, and he collapsed to the ground with a stiff expression.

His father had been killed by the yao. Old and weighed down by an overwhelming fate, the Grand Sage departed from the world soon after. Arjin had been left with no words of guidance. Having forsaken his ancestral teachings, he'd strayed onto a path riddled with thorns. He had the vague sense that he'd made a mistake somewhere along the way, but he couldn't figure out how things had gotten to such a point. Numbly, he reached into his robes and pulled out the wooden mask Sheng Lingyuan had gifted him during that year's Purification Festival. Like a lost child searching for home, he stared at it for what felt like an eternity. Then, trembling, he placed it over his face—the mask symbolising his father's and brother's protection.

"The flowers blooming around the altar's pool are called the Flowers of Life and Death. They can help clear the mind and steady the spirit. Under the moonlight, a blood-like dew gathers on its petals, dyeing them red. Drinking it is said to have mysterious benefits for those suffering from hysteria, even restoring

sanity to the maddened." Then Sheng Lingyuan added, "And well, it can help forgetful old fools recall their forgotten lives.

"The pool itself symbolises the mother. The shamans believed that they were born here and that they would return here after death. It was here that they found solace and protection."

Xuan Ji edged closer to the cavern's opening and peeked through the gaps between vines. After a moment, he asked, "Wasn't there a bunch of forbidden sorcery here? Why didn't Arjin use any of it?"

"He wouldn't have dared—that would have been sacrilege," Sheng Lingyuan replied. "Besides, the more destructive the sorcery, the steeper its price. The old chieftain had passed too abruptly, leaving Arjin with an incomplete understanding of much of the shamans' spellcraft. He was wary of making a mistake."

Xuan Ji scanned the cave. "This looks like a good place to hide out for a day or two. Did something hold you up on the way? Were you late?"

"No, I was not delayed. I arrived just in time."

Having endured a siege lasting three days and nights, the warriors of Dongchuan were utterly exhausted. Given a brief respite, all but a few sentries were sprawled on the ground, sleeping off their injuries. Even Arjin curled up near the entrance to the forbidden cavern. Wearing his mask, bathed in the faint glow of the Flowers of Life and Death, and with the mountain deity by his side, he felt safe. He slept like a baby.

Xuan Ji noticed the sentries growing increasingly drowsy. Suddenly, he caught a faintly sweet fragrance, light and fleeting.

It was like the essence of a spring garden carried by a breeze from miles away. He immediately pinched his nose as a surprising thought flashed through his mind: *Whoa, so fifth-columnists were already a thing back then?*

Sure enough, several sentries swayed unsteadily before collapsing one by one. Moments later, one of Arjin's personal guards opened his eyes. Those eyes were devoid of sleepiness—and of life's warmth. Seeing the guard's hollow stare, Xuan Ji immediately realised something and turned to Sheng Lingyuan. "Wait, he's not actually a traitor, is he? Didn't you say earlier that the shamans' old chieftain was killed by something called a 'human-skin puppet'? So this..."

"You have sharp eyes, little yao," Sheng Lingyuan remarked. "Dan Li was a crafty man. How would he let anything escape his control?"

Xuan Ji shuddered.

The "human-skin puppet" silently approached Arjin and lowered its gaze to the oblivious young chieftain. Behind its lifeless eyes lurked the shadow of another soul. It bent down towards Arjin...

Xuan Ji's eyes widened. With a horror film, this would have been the part when he started watching from between his fingers.

But contrary to expectation, the human-skin puppet didn't do anything sinister. It lifted a cloak and gently draped it over Arjin, brushing aside a stray braid from his cheek with the tenderness of a doting father. Arjin stirred at the warmth and snuggled into the cloak, murmuring something in the shaman

tongue.

The human-skin puppet sighed faintly. Stepping carefully over Arjin's legs, it made its way towards the forbidden cavern. As it walked, it pulled a fire stick from its pocket and ignited it with a flick of its fingers. The flame had a peculiar hue—a deep crimson, like a sunset on the brink of nightfall. Though warm in colour, it carried an unmistakable cold.

The vines sealing the cavern recoiled from the approaching flames as if encountering their natural enemy. They shrank back rapidly, creating an opening just wide enough for a single person to pass through—and revealing the entirety of the cavern. Within, a tranquil pool of water surrounded a stone platform. An assortment of sealed earthen jars and inscription-laden leaves rested upon it.

Perhaps stirred by the light, Arjin groggily opened his eyes. After a muddleheaded moment, he snapped awake and stared in shock at his guard—the companion who had been with him day and night. "What are you doing?!"

The human-skin puppet did not turn around. Instead, it leant down and threw the flaming stick into the water. Remarkably, the fire was not extinguished. Instead, it ignited the pool as though the water were laced with petrol!

Arjin leapt to his feet, but before he could seize the arsonist, he saw the man's skin rapidly wither and cling tightly to his "bones". Beneath that skin was a wooden puppet carved into the shape of a human. Arjin froze, stunned. In that instant, everything finally connected in his mind—the letter, the former chieftain's death, the quiet substitution of the guard that had

been his lifelong companion... All of the threads converged, twisting their way towards a single harrowing truth.

With a loud cry, Arjin lunged into the cavern.

But it was too late.

Those who betrayed their ancestral teachings no longer enjoyed the protection of the mountain god. Perhaps, the deities were ordained to crumble alongside the clay idols. Perhaps, what had been worshipped was but folly from the start. The falsehoods were now laid bare, and the water blazed.

The sealed jars atop the platform shattered one by one, releasing shadowy forms. Like liberated spectres, they rampaged chaotically through the cavern. In desperation, Arjin threw his body against the entrance to block it. Turning back to his stunned tribesmen, he shouted, "Hurry! Leave the altar, now!"

The forbidden curses latched onto the scent of flesh and blood. Driven by the wicked flames, they lunged at Arjin greedily. His screams became distorted as one of the curses tore his entire body apart. He hadn't had time to remove the wooden mask. It split in half, but a fragment continued clinging to his face, fixed with blood. But before Arjin's eyes could even close, another curse pieced his broken body back together. The white Flowers of Life and Death turned red, and their crimson nectar coursed over him like blood, forcing his tortured consciousness back into clarity. He was torn apart and reassembled again and again by countless curses, trapped in a cycle of life and death.

The shamans fled in a chorus of wails. The tightly shut gates creaked open one by one, and the altar rose to the surface once more. But the first of the shamans to charge out screamed in ter-

ror and stumbled backwards—the cave's entrance had been set ablaze!

It was yao fire that burnt pure white. A brave shaman warrior stepped forward with gritted teeth and attempted to break through the inferno. But as soon as he touched the flames, he was reduced to ash. The flames lashed hungrily into the cave, consuming everything in their path. They even threatened to melt the stone at the entrance.

In a panic, the shamans hurriedly lowered the altar below ground once more.

Meanwhile, Arjin's torment showed no signs of ending. Blood pooled beneath his feet, collecting in a shallow depression in the ground. From the blood emerged butterfly larvae the size of sesame seeds, growing rapidly and unfurling their wings. Unlike the familiar Mirage Butterflies, these blood-covered insects took to the air without need of a host, their wings shimmering with the same ominous red glow as the cursed fire engulfing the cavern. They surged towards the crowd!

"You wanted to know what was different about those Human-Faced Butterflies, did you not?" Sheng Lingyuan's voice echoed faintly, as though from a distance. "Look—there they are. A malevolent curse that even the flames of the yao cannot consume."

A sudden, blinding brilliance filled Xuan Ji's vision, nearly making his eyes water. It took him a moment to realise that his perspective had suddenly shifted, and he was now outside the cave. The entirety of Dongchuan was shrouded in ghostly white yao fire. He heard a shout and turned towards the sound. The

young Sheng Lingyuan was attempting to charge in while a group of people scrambled to restrain him.

He had only been late by a single day. More precisely, just one evening.

"This fire burnt for seven days and seven nights," Xuan Ji heard the Sheng Lingyuan beside him say. "No one could extinguish it. Do you know why?"

A chill filled Xuan Ji's chest. Before he could respond, the scene collapsed again. The two of them were forced to follow the young emperor as he staggered into the cave.

Seven days later, the fire had finally died down. Everything was scorched, and the entire altar was like a giant oven reeking of charred meat. By now, those inside should have been cooked through—yet bizarrely, the burnt corpses were all standing upright. They were chatting and laughing as if nothing had happened; it was a scene reminiscent of the evening gatherings on the mountaintop square in Sheng Lingyuan's memories. By the cavern entrance at the far end of the cave, an unscathed Arjin stood gazing at the young emperor through the crowd with an unreadable expression. It was a look caught between a sneer and a smile.

As soon as Arjin tilted his head, it fell to the ground. He beckoned to it with a sigh, and it rolled back towards him. The young man picked it up and clumsily set it back atop his neck. His androgynous face was flawlessly pale, appearing untouched by the intense heat. But the wooden mask fragment finally fell away, revealing the half of his face that it had been shielding. It was charred beyond recognition, a mess of scorched flesh and

bone.

Arjin replaced the mask, once more hiding his horrifying burns. His voice echoed through the cave as he called out, "Lingyuan."

The young emperor went mad and frantically flung off his attendants. As the men were about to give chase, a voice abruptly stopped them.

"Halt!" it commanded. "Do you wish to end up like those inside?"

The voice was Dan Li's. Xuan Ji whipped his head around in time to see a man step forward. He was draped in a long robe, and his face was completely hidden behind a mask. In that instant, the entire sequence of events strung itself together in Xuan Ji's mind.

Tens of thousands of scorched shaman corpses stood surrounding Arjin. Their murmurs ceased, and they all turned towards the cave's entrance. Their gazes silently questioned Sheng Lingyuan—the one from the memory and the one outside of it, the same person three millennia apart.

Time and space seemed to freeze.

Arjin held his head as he stood up. In the deafening silence, he whispered, "Lingyuan-*gege*, how did my father die?"

"Your Majesty, do not approach!" the masked Dan Li shouted.

"Was it *him*?"

Arjin pointed towards Dan Li, and his visible eye swivelled in the same direction. All at once, the charred shamans turned their heads as well.

"Or *you*?"

Even more chilling was how, when a faint smirk appeared on Arjin's face, all of the shamans mirrored his expression.

The bright young man, once as radiant as the sun, had become a spider. His vast web ensnared countless insects to his beck and call.

Dan Li continued to shout. "Your Majesty, Arjin has succumbed to madness! Every corpse in this cave has become a puppet of his Human-Faced Butterflies! There are no living souls here!"

Arjin burst into laughter, his voice reverberating throughout the cave. Two streams of blood-red tears trickled down his face. All shamans around him opened their mouths in eerie unison.

"The living... are the living the only ones that matter?"

Beyond the confines of the memory, Sheng Lingyuan stood apart from the crowd, his gaze fixed on the unfolding tragedy. His tone was indifferent as he returned to his earlier topic. "Those pure white flames are known as the 'Austral Flames'. Little yao, you call yourself the Keeper of the Austral Flames—can you not discern how they differ from ordinary fire?"

But instead of answering, Xuan Ji chuckled bitterly. "Your Majesty, have you ever spoken a single truthful word in your entire life?"

Sheng Lingyuan turned his head slowly, a faint smile curling on his lips. "Oh? What makes you say that?"

It was then that Xuan Ji noticed something: beneath the outer corner of Sheng Lingyuan's left eye was a barely perceptible scar. Almost entirely smoothed out by time, it was not usually

visible. But when he smiled, the raised skin exposed a faint, white indentation on his cheek—like a solitary tear.

At that moment, inside the memory space, the charred shaman corpses stirred. Following Arjin's will, they rushed out of the cave. Outside, the masked Dan Li swiftly formed a hand seal, and pure white flames erupted from his sleeves. They took the form of a great bird. It screeched, charging towards the death-suffused cave and the altar within.

But the young emperor blocked the firebird with his body. "Stop!" he screamed, tearing open his throat. His voice barely sounded human.

"Your Majesty, if you let them leave, what will happen to our billions of living subjects?" Dan Li roared.

These words had a double meaning—

If the malevolent Human-Faced Butterflies were released upon the world, who could predict the consequences? These butterflies were clearly different from the original species. In the worst case scenario, they could become a silent plague.

But then there was Arjin himself. Even before falling into madness, he'd had a radical nature. He despised all yao indiscriminately, whether they were good or bad. Regardless of stance, he refused to tolerate anyone or anything associated with the word "yao". He adamantly razed every yao settlement he passed without sparing a single life.

Then, what if that hatred were redirected towards humans—and magnified tenfold?

Arjin had been ripped up and reassembled by curses countless times. Neither his prayers for life nor those for death had been

heard by the divines, and his soul had plunged into demonic madness. Were they supposed to leave him be—and allow him to slaughter all of humanity?

The young Sheng Lingyuan understood. The white firebird flew past him and into the cave with a thunderous roar, landing amidst the countless shaman puppets. They all screamed as they were set ablaze. As though they were still alive.

Yet they could not be completely consumed by the flames, and they could not be truly killed.

The young Sheng Lingyuan knelt down despondently, watching the charred corpses' torment in the sea of fire. After some time, he suddenly drew an oddly shaped dagger from his belt and swung it at the nearest shaman's neck. Only when its head fell to the ground did the shaman's body twitch and crumple. A small Human-Faced Butterfly flew out of the corpse.

Blinded by the blaze, Arjin screamed, "Dan Li! Where are you? You liar, where are you?! You're not going to come out of this with a clean death!"

Dan Li's voice came from outside the cave. "Your Majesty! It was your leniency that brought him to this point. How much longer will you continue to indulge him?!"

With a howl, the young Sheng Lingyuan slashed his way into the cave. The raging fire seemed to intentionally avoid him; not even the hems of his garments were singed. The butterflies flying out of the decapitated shamans' bodies also avoided him, instead converging into a glowing white arc in front of Arjin. Their wings were covered in countless human faces, forming expressions that held both joy and sorrow. Sheng Lingyuan gave

chase and cleaved them in half with a single slash.

The dagger did not falter; like a beam of light, it pierced through Arjin's chest. A cold gleam flashed across the blade, and a string of shamanic glyphs appeared on the hilt.

Arjin gaped at the dagger in disbelief. "This is... the dagger I stole from my father when I led my people out of Dongchuan... to keep you safe... to drive away evil... *Ge...*"

I gave it to you.

Within the memory, the young emperor was in unbearable pain; outside the memory, the millennia-old soul stood still with his arms crossed, as if these events had nothing to do with him.

Xuan Ji quickly stepped back. "I never did anything to wrong you."

The smile at the corners of Sheng Lingyuan's eyes deepened. "Then how is it that you have *The Yao Compendium* in your eye? Did you know that the *Compendium* was written by Dan Li himself? No matter your purpose in keeping my body, nurturing a demonic corpse means being prepared to face the consequences..."

The moment the name "Dan Li" was spoken, the raging flames within the cave erupted into a violent gale, carrying with it Arjin's blood-curdling scream. The wind surged forward, ripping the mask off Dan Li's head and revealing the face beneath—a face identical to Xuan Ji's!

A hand suddenly came tearing out of the void behind Xuan Ji. It had a bloody hole in its palm—and it clenched his throat in a death grip. At that exact moment, a long spike appeared in

Sheng Lingyuan's fist. Using Xuan Ji as his shield, he drove the spike towards the hand without hesitation—or regard for its captive.

I knew it! Xuan Ji cursed inwardly. Counting on this old demon to spare him was the epitome of wishful thinking. Faced with imminent death, Xuan Ji had no choice but to save himself. From his pocket, he pulled out a coin, its surface gleaming with a fiery aura—and pressed it hard against his captor's wrist. There was a sharp hiss of flesh being charred, and the hand loosened its grip. Xuan Ji made a narrow escape just as Sheng Lingyuan drove his spike straight into the palm's bloody hole. It pierced clean through, grazing the skin on Xuan Ji's neck. He'd barely avoided being skewered by the demon like a stick of kebab!

"Pardon me," Sheng Lingyuan said with no sincerity whatsoever. "A necessary expedient—I intended you no harm."

Whatever respect Xuan Ji still held for Emperor Wu disintegrated entirely. "Go enjoy a long stroll off a nice, short pier," he spat through gritted teeth.

Sheng Lingyuan quickly wrenched someone out of the void. Of course, it was Arjin—the one raised from his coffin with the bloody hole in his forehead. The Retrograde spell immediately shattered, and the fragmented memories dissolved. The three of them returned to the eerie shaman burial ground once more.

With blinding speed, Sheng Lingyuan jabbed spikes through Arjin's limbs and chest. And yet, Arjin's venomous gaze remained fixed on Xuan Ji.

"What are you glaring at me for?!" Xuan Ji massaged his neck, feeling aggrieved by the misplaced animosity. "Haven't

you put two and two together yet? He used me as bait to lure you out! That 'Dan Li' in the memory was just an ad lib! Pure fiction! Dan Li doesn't even look like that! I can't believe the Demonic Revenant club accepted someone with so few brain cells..."

Arjin was unable to decipher modern language, let alone Xuan Ji's creative use of it. Having understood nothing, he continued to glower with unbridled hatred.

Sheng Lingyuan raised an eyebrow. "You're pretty clever, little yao. When did you figure it out?"

Xuan Ji cleared his throat to get the rasp out of his voice, then plastered on a fake smile. "You said your nostalgia made you easy to trap in your childhood memories. But when you told me to ask you questions, something felt off. Was that memory even yours?"

The memories within Retrograde were undeniably layered with intense emotions—kind favours, bitter grudges, a medley of love and hate... They were a far cry from the Revenant's cold, indifferent demeanour.

During their time together, Xuan Ji had long figured out that this old bastard was utterly devoid of human warmth. There was simply no way he could have been harbouring such melodramatic sentiments. He didn't bat an eye at the catastrophic backlash unleashed by the Dark Descent—and yet, a paltry spell could compel him to lay bare his memories so obediently? Pie would sooner fall from the sky.

Judging by his expression, Sheng Lingyuan figured that while Xuan Ji spoke with civility, in his heart, he was likely cursing

him and his ancestors. Unperturbed, he said, "Mm. A kindred spirit, I see."

"When an important figure like Dan Li never showed up, I began to suspect you had special plans for him."

"Dan Li never showed his true face to begin with," Sheng Lingyuan explained. "Even if he didn't obscure it outright, he always donned a human-skin mask. What you now describe as 'a face as fair as a maiden's' was merely the mask he favoured most. Even Arjin went to his grave having never seen his true visage. I lack the power to fabricate false memories in the presence of Retrograde's spellcaster."

Xuan Ji sneered. "Of course. How else would you plant your bait? But whether he chose to hide his face or not, this man played a vital role by your side. Yet, in your memories, he had even less of a presence than your guards. You must have been suppressing your memories. You stopped yourself from dwelling on him too much to avoid ruining the climax later. Your Majesty, I might not excel in maths, but I did complete nine years of compulsory education. Those memories were from three different perspectives. Did you think I couldn't count?"

The logic was simple: if Retrograde contained only Sheng Lingyuan's memories, then all of them should have been from his perspective alone. But the memories they'd just experienced had been from three distinct points of view: Arjin's, Sheng Lingyuan's, and that of a third, more enigmatic contributor—Dan Li.

Dan Li's perspective had only appeared at the very end—covertly, and with very little content. It happened during the scene

where the shamans retreated into the cave, and the human-skin puppet set fire to the altar. Dan Li had been the one controlling the puppet, so naturally, the perspective must have been his.

A person's subjective memory operated solely from their own viewpoint. Shifts in perspective were impossible, and a person couldn't "remember" events from which they were absent. Yet, the memories had flowed as smoothly as scenes from a film.

It was clear that the memories within Retrograde couldn't have belonged to a single individual.

When the two of them were pulled into the spell, the first scene had been of the shaman tribe rescuing the injured young prince. It was the moment the shamans' young chieftain-to-be encountered Sheng Lingyuan for the first time. In retrospect, that memory had clearly belonged to Arjin. At the time, Sheng Lingyuan had been gravely injured. He was barely conscious as the chieftain carried him up the mountain. Given his condition, he was unlikely to have remembered the shaman tribe's mountain village in such vivid detail.

The first key figure they encountered within the memory had also been Arjin.

That was when the ever perceptive Sheng Lingyuan must have realised: the spellcaster was hiding within his own spell.

The one wandering endlessly through the trivialities of his youth was never the heartless old bastard Sheng Lingyuan at all. It had been Arjin himself.

No wonder Sheng Lingyuan, who was supposedly "stuck in the past", had responded with such calm detachment when Xuan Ji tried to offer him suggestions.

When Sheng Lingyuan told Xuan Ji to ask questions, those queries were, in fact, intended for Arjin.

Xuan Ji said, "Some key events in the memories align with the historical timeline I'm familiar with, so I'd wager the memories themselves were authentic... but most of them were actually his, weren't they?"

"Oh? How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"When the memories in Retrograde centred on you and Arjin, the figures from your side—courtiers, ministers, and the like—were all blurry placeholders. On the other hand, the shaman tribe was vividly detailed and full of life. Their customs and traditions were laid bare as though someone were desperate to recount their rise and fall. It almost felt like someone was pouring their heart out. You *do* know what 'pouring their heart out' means, don't you, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. You're right," Sheng Lingyuan replied with all the empathy of a stone wall.

"Meanwhile, not only did you suppress your own memories and empty your mind—you manipulated his emotions just to draw him out," Xuan Ji said icily. "Was it my comment doubting your escape from the yao as children that inspired you to dump this shit bowl on my head?"

Sheng Lingyuan answered honestly. "Not at all. I was dragged into this spell due to my own oversight. Given the constraints of the situation, I simply made use of whatever was at hand."

Xuan Ji was speechless. *Thank you for considering me worthy of "use"!*

"You knew that the annihilation of the shaman tribe was Ar-

jin's most harrowing memory. You deliberately slipped in Dan Li's perspective while his state of mind was at its most fragile."

"It wasn't difficult. I just imagined myself as him," Sheng Lingyuan said indifferently. "After all, Dan Li was the one who made me who I am."

Xuan Ji chuckled bitterly. "Indeed. There were only three people in the spell. You, me, and Arjin. As the spellcaster, Arjin could easily distinguish between his own perspective and yours. So, if a third perspective were to suddenly appear, it could only be mine. Naturally, he would assume that the perspective of the human-skin puppet belonged to me, and once he was blinded by his anger, he would definitely come after me. I was your hook, your bait, and your meat shield! So many roles all at once—don't you think I deserve to be paid several salaries for my performance, Your Majesty?"

"Dan Li lived his life hidden behind a mask," Sheng Lingyuan said. "It wasn't until I imprisoned and beheaded him that I could finally remove it. But under that mask was raw flesh, the features almost indistinguishable. I never saw his true face myself, so I had to borrow yours. You have my thanks."

Delivered in a formal, stately tone, his words finally caused a ripple in Arjin's frozen expression.

"Dan Li has been dead for millennia," Sheng Lingyuan said softly, raising a hand to gently cover Arjin's eyes. "And so have we. In this world, humans and yao are no longer distinguishable, and there hasn't been war for nearly a century. The flames of the Crimson Abyss have long since been extinguished, Arjin..."

Slowly, word by word, Arjin muttered something in the sha-

man tongue. Even Xuan Ji recognised that these were the same words he had spoken in the memory just before his death.

Xuan Ji asked, "What did he say?"

Sheng Lingyuan didn't answer, instead driving the last spike through Arjin's brow. Finally, Arjin was still. The brilliant light in his pupils gradually dimmed, and his eyelids closed.

Sheng Lingyuan lifted the ghastly body and jumped nimbly to the stone platform in the centre of the pool. Gently, he lowered Arjin into the coffin once more. With a sweep of his sleeve, he shattered the Dark Descent inscription on the stone platform into fragments.

Still nursing the bruises Arjin had left around his neck, Xuan Ji stayed well away. From a distance, he watched the Demonic Revenant's dramatic performance of leaning over the coffin and gazing at the person inside.

As if you cared.

Eventually, Xuan Ji crossed his arms and said half-mockingly, "Say, Your Majesty? You've been bowing for the audience for five whole minutes now. That's plenty of time for everyone to take photos, so maybe it's time to move on, don't you think?"

Only then did Sheng Lingyuan finally snap out of his trance. He pushed the coffin lid closed and slowly straightened himself. But then, the elbow he had been leaning against the bronze coffin gave out. Sheng Lingyuan abruptly turned his head and covered his mouth—

Blood was seeping through his fingers.

TBC

XUANJI SHENGLINGYUAN

Xuanji Shenglingyuan

The falsehoods were now laid bare, and the water blazed.

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